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CHAPTER 6

APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE AND THE STUDY OF EARLY JEWISH MYSTICISM

RA'ANAN BOUSTAN AND PATRICK G. MCCULLOUGH

UNDER the influence of Gershom Scholem in the mid-twentieth century (Scholem 1954, 1965), work in the field of early Jewish mysticism has been informed by the hypothesis that there existed within ancient Judaism a continuous tradition of ecstatic mysticism. Scholem traced a direct historical trajectory from the Second Temple apocalypses to the early rabbinic teachings in the Mishnah, Tosefta, and Palestinian Talmud about the divine chariot-throne (*merkavah*) and, finally, to Hekhalot literature of late antiquity. Yet, over the past three decades, this powerful paradigm has gradually come unraveled, due in no small part to contemporaneous developments in the study of the apocalyptic texts from the Hellenistic and early Roman periods. Rather than approaching these various textual corpora as evidence for a single, unbroken tradition of Jewish mysticism, many scholars now emphasize the significant linguistic, formal, and conceptual differences among them (e.g., Halperin 1980; Schäfer 1984b, 2009; Himmelfarb 1988, 1993, 2006; Boustan 2007, 2011; Mizrahi 2009).

This fundamental reassessment of the dynamics of continuity and innovation in the exegetical, speculative, and ritual traditions surrounding Ezekiel's vision of the *merkavah* has gone hand-in-hand with a decidedly historicist, discursive, and

materialist "turn" within the study of religion more generally. In the wake of critical inquiry into the popular and scholarly genealogy of the concept "mysticism" (de Certeau 1984; Katz 1978; Proudfoot 1985; Sharf 1998), specialists in the field of Jewish mysticism have increasingly questioned the assumption that the literatures they study are best interpreted as a Jewish variant of a universal "mystical" experience or state of consciousness. Indeed, it has been suggested that, for Scholem and many others in the field, the term mysticism represents an ideologically and even theologically laden category masquerading as a generally applicable analytical term (Huss 2007, 2012).

In this essay, we consider what is at stake in studying apocalyptic literature within the framework of "early Jewish mysticism." We explore how this analytical framework continues to inform scholarship on apocalyptic literature and its relationship to subsequent forms of Jewish revelatory and ascent traditions from late antiquity, even as some have begun to question its applicability and utility. We argue that comparison of early Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writings with rabbinic and Hekhalot materials ought to be carried out under the sign of difference, rather than as an operation aimed at demonstrating the essential unity of the religious phenomena supposedly behind the texts (Smith 1990, 36–53; 2004, 230–322).

The essay begins by analyzing the thoroughgoing impact that critical scholarship on the modern genealogy of mysticism has exerted in recent years on the field of early Jewish mysticism. We then consider a number of alternative approaches taken in the field to the patterns of similarity and difference between early Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature and Jewish ascent texts from late antiquity, especially Hekhalot literature. Scholars have variously reconstructed the social location of the producers of these diverse corpora. The social imaginary of these bodies of texts differs in basic ways, and we believe that this points to significant changes in the institutional contexts out of which the texts emerged. These shifts in the institutional settings of apocalyptic, rabbinic, and Hekhalot literatures align with differences in the forms of textual production and authority, suggesting important developments in the core aims and functions of these different corpora. Thus, we end the essay by examining the analytical implications of examining textual production and literary representation in apocalyptic and Hekhalot texts.

1. Apocalyptic Literature and the Discourse of "Mysticism" in Religious Studies

In recent years, scholars of religion have become increasingly sensitive to the concern that many of their interpretative tools are in fact parochial normative categories

and not legitimate analytical terms. In this section, we trace this reevaluation as it relates to the concept of "mysticism" in religious studies generally. Precise relationships proposed between apocalyptic literature and Hekhalot texts depend on how one considers "early Jewish mysticism" as a discursive category. "Mysticism" typically denotes ecstatic religious *experience*. As such, when academics apply the category to these two corpora, they often seek to identify how their common motifs indicate shared experiential practices. Yet consideration of the ideological assumptions embedded within the category of "mysticism" raises potent challenges to any simplistic account of the commonalities between apocalyptic literature and Hekhalot texts.

The category of "mysticism," as it has long been used within the discipline of religious studies, belongs to the history of modern European theology and philosophy. The term at its most general refers to a private, interiorized, and unmediated encounter with the divine, thereby valorizing individualized, anti-institutional, and indeed anticlerical forms of piety. As recently as 1980, Margaret Smith could define mysticism as "the most vital element in all true religions, rising up in revolt against cold formality and religious torpor" (1980, 20). This definition is, of course, only the latest reflex of the two-century-old approach inaugurated by Friedrich Schleiermacher, who saw the essence of religion as "neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling" (1996, 22). It was this tradition of post-Enlightenment liberal theology that permanently severed the "mystical" from its ancient and medieval antecedents, which had centered on communal rituals of initiation into the "mysteries" (Gr. *mystēria, myeō*), often with the promise of postmortem salvation. Influenced by the emphasis on subjective individual consciousness in Schleiermacher, William James at the dawn of the twentieth century helped to crystallize the scholarly study of mysticism as philosophical and psychological inquiry into the private realm of "experience" (James 2012).

These classic conceptions of "mysticism" that inaugurated the field have undergone radical reevaluation in the past three decades by both philosophers and historians of religion. Most damningly, a growing chorus of scholars has argued that the study of mystical experience itself constitutes an ideological exercise: not only does the language of mystical union (*unio mystica*) naturalize the forms of piety valorized in post-Reformation and post-Enlightenment Christianity, but its application to the so-called world religions is part and parcel of the history of European missionizing and colonialism (King 1999, 7). This deconstructive tendency reflects the discursive approach of scholars such as Talal Asad, who has argued compellingly that "there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes" (1993, 29). Moreover, Wayne Proudfoot and others have diagnosed the inner contradiction of using the notion of religious or mystical "experience" to stipulate an object of academic inquiry. For, if "experience" is defined as

purely private and unmediated, it cannot be studied. And, as soon as a mystical experience should lose these features, it ceases to be an experience so defined. The discourse of "experience" thus intentionally evades critical analysis, while also establishing the experiential as the very "essence" of religion that underwrites the discipline's institutional position in the academy (Sharf 1998, 95; see also Katz 1978; de Certeau 1984).

The academic study of Jewish mysticism has followed much the same arc, from the universally applicable "essences" of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the deconstructive critiques of the late twentieth. Scholem generated a "myth of neglect" on the part of his nineteenth-century forebears toward mysticism and magic, although many of them were the first to publish these materials in critical editions and to subject them to scholarly analysis (Myers 2008). But, despite his exaggerations, as early as the 1920s, Scholem correctly sensed that the time was ripe to challenge the excessive reliance in Jewish studies on normative categories and traditions. Indeed, his voluminous studies demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt that even the most "marginal" magical, mystical, apocalyptic, hagiographic, or paraliturgical text does not simply draw on more authoritative textual traditions, but represents constitutive elements of those traditions.

Scholem's studies of Jewish sources from antiquity sought to recover the roots of a specifically Jewish mystical experience with its own distinctive features. By locating a shared network of images, symbols, and themes across apocalyptic, rabbinic, and Hekhalot literatures, he believed he had unearthed the experiential substrate behind these corpora. Scholem thus hoped to "rescue" discussions of mysticism "from the welter of conflicting historical and metaphysical arguments" preceding him (1995, 3). Scholem saw early Jewish mysticism developing across three historical stages, connected by their interest in ascent to heaven, the *merkavah* (Ezekiel's chariot-throne), and related motifs: "the anonymous conventicles of the old apocalyptics; the Merkabah speculation of the Mishnaic teachers who are known to us by name; and the Merkabah mysticism of late and post-Talmudic times" (1995, 43). The simplicity of Scholem's narrative belies the complexity with which he understood the inner dialectic between the mystical and halachic-normative dimensions within a single but multifaceted Judaism. Nevertheless, his three-stage schema delimited the contours of the field of "early Jewish mysticism"—and continues to do so even for those skeptical of its methodological underpinnings.

Scholem's legacy has inspired scholars interested in maximizing commonalities across the various textual corpora that purportedly represent the history of "early Jewish mysticism." For example, Christopher Rowland and Christopher Morray-Jones explicitly articulate their maximalist aims: "One function of this work is to seek to consider together that which scholarship has often kept apart" (2009, 3). Rowland and Morray-Jones acknowledge that a typical understanding of mystical union, along with traditional readings of New Testament texts, may lead many to believe that hardly any mystical union might be found within the NT texts. Yet these authors prefer a broad view of mystical union, in which it is

for Christians "about identification with, infusion with, or being clothed with, the divine Christ. It is a divine enfolding or indwelling, in which human and divine worlds meet, and is mystical in its intensity and conviction" (6). Thus, Rowland and Morray-Jones blend together mysticism and apocalypticism, employing a sweeping and inclusive conception of "mystical union" broadly linked to the visionary imagination. Such projects continue Scholem's legacy of studying diverse genres and textual corpora within an analytical frame heavily invested in the concept of mysticism.

Others have sought to reevaluate Scholem's legacy, validating some elements of his paradigm while questioning others. Moshe Idel has been critical of Scholem's emphasis on the speculative or theosophical aspects of Jewish mysticism, emphasizing instead the centrality of embodied praxis within the tradition (e.g., 1988, 2005), though he has largely affirmed the early roots and continuity of the Jewish mystical tradition. More fundamental still has been Elliot Wolfson's emphasis on the hermeneutical dimension of mystical experience. For Wolfson, Jewish mysticism represents a continuous tradition in which "each mystic receives something from his or her predecessor, but that legacy is enriched by personal experiences" (1994, 53). He adds, moreover, that, "the imagination produces symbols of the spiritual entities that act as interpretive filtering screens through which these entities appear in human consciousness" (1994, 62). Wolfson's hermeneutics of imagination resists the reduction of mysticism either to a nondiscursive private experience or to a public script governed by linguistic or literary conventions. He thus brilliantly deconstructs the regnant dichotomies that have plagued analysis of early Jewish mystical literature, such as the distinction between the "psychological" and the "real" or between "exegetical activity" and "ecstatic experience." In that respect, Wolfson attempts to identify a "genealogy" for the Jewish mystical tradition, while also questioning simplistic paradigms of mystical experience itself.

Philip Alexander, for his part, continues to define mysticism in experiential terms, but questions the placement of apocalyptic literature within the development of early Jewish mysticism. Instead, Alexander gives the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* found among the Dead Sea Scrolls and at Masada pride of place as the earliest precursor in the "genealogy of Christian as well as of Jewish mysticism" (2006, 143). He claims that the *Songs* represent evidence of mystical practice as true experience, and not mere literary construction. Indeed, Alexander's very definition of mysticism relies on experience: "the experience of a transcendent divine presence which stands behind the visible, material world" (2006, 8). While Alexander does argue that Jewish mysticism began at Qumran, he does not include apocalyptic literature in this progression. He simply states in a single footnote that "although apocalyptic may testify indirectly to mysticism, it is not in itself mystical" (2006, 11n5).

Peter Schäfer's analytic interventions represent perhaps the most thoroughly revisionist perspective on Scholem. Schäfer does find a common denominator undergirding the various literatures typically used to study early Jewish mysticism

(Ezekiel, ascent apocalypses, Hekhalot literature, Qumran texts, Philo, and the rabbis), namely, an image of a God who remains approachable in his heavenly sanctuary and who continues to care for his earthly community. At the same time, such common themes should not indicate a progression originating in Ezekiel and reaching their culmination in the *merkavah* mystics of Hekhalot literature. According to Schäfer, interpreters must learn to accept "the polymorphic and even chaotic evidence that our sources confront us with" (2009, 354). Early Jewish mysticism—as found in these texts—should be viewed as the variegated application of similar themes and literary forms within particular historical situations. Yet, while Schäfer problematizes the title of his own book (*The Origins of Jewish Mysticism*), he largely remains within the conventional parameters of the field as it has been constituted since Scholem. It, therefore, remains to be seen whether the field will radically reconfigure its own evidentiary contours and conceptual framework, as scholars debate whether to reconsider its definition(s) of "early Jewish mysticism" or whether to discard the category altogether.

2. CONTINUITY AND RUPTURE IN THE JEWISH DISCOURSE OF HEAVENLY ASCENT

At the center of debates regarding the unity of the field of "early Jewish mysticism" stands a diverse set of literary motifs that have been taken as evidence for or against historical and phenomenological continuity. In this section, we offer an overview of these motifs and explore how patterns of literary similarity or difference have served as proxies for claims regarding continuity in religious practice and experience. In particular, we consider how the theme of ascent to heaven—in which a visionary (usually pseudonymous) is given access to the heavenly realm—has figured in scholarly discourse concerning the development of early Jewish mysticism.

The centrality of heavenly ascent within the Hekhalot corpus and early Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature has led some to view both groups of sources as literary expressions of a common tradition of ecstatic mysticism (Scholem 1954, 40–79; Gruenwald 1980; Morray-Jones 1992, 2002; Elior 2004). In addition, both build upon Ezekiel's vision of the *merkavah* (Ezek 1, 10). Moreover, Ezekiel's vision exerted an influence on such Second Temple texts as the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* and Pseudo-Ezekiel (4Q385 and other fragments). Some early rabbinic texts likewise address Ezekiel's vision of the *merkavah* (e.g., *m. Ḥagigah* 2:1). Finally, *Hekhalot Rabbati*, *Hekhalot Zutarti*, and other texts from the Hekhalot corpus display further developments of the *merkavah* vision. Thus, Scholem and those following him have seen in these visions of the *merkavah*, amid such diverse evidence from different periods, a trajectory of mystical experience termed "*merkavah* mysticism."

Yet fundamental methodological objections have been raised to the reading practices and historical assumptions upon which this line of scholarship has constructed its claims of literary, sociological, and even phenomenological continuity. In a programmatic essay on the problem of comparison, Peter Schäfer argues that literary motifs or themes in Hekhalot texts cannot be properly understood outside of the specific—and often shifting—literary context(s) and thought-system(s) in which they are deployed. He, therefore, suggests that scholars should resist the temptation to make use of *decontextualized* literary parallels as positive evidence of continuity between sources, practices, or groups far removed from each other in space or time (1984b). Below, after a discussion of relevant literary similarities and how they are deployed in scholarship, we highlight the work of Martha Himmelfarb in her attempts to better contextualize these similarities and differences.

The description of an ascent in *2 (Slavonic) Enoch* contains many of the motifs one might use to highlight the continuity between apocalyptic and Hekhalot literatures. As with other apocalyptic and Hekhalot works (e.g., *1 En.* 14; *1 En.* 60, 71; *Test. Levi* 5; *Apoc. Abr.* 18), the vision of God in *2 Enoch* evokes the spectacular *merkavah* (throne-chariot) vision of Ezekiel 1 and 10 (cf. Dan 7). In addition, Andrei Orlov has suggested that there may be angelological traditions especially linked to the tradition of Metatron that also point to lines of continuity between this early Jewish apocalypse and subsequent Hekhalot traditions in which Metatron is more fully developed (Orlov 2005). Though the date of *2 Enoch* is uncertain, the work appears to have originated relatively early, perhaps among Alexandrian Jews in the first century C.E. Long before its translation into Old Church Slavonic and its transmission in the Russian Orthodox tradition, versions of the text circulated in other languages and among other communities during late antiquity (Orlov et al. 2012, 37–126).

In this work, "two huge men" come to Enoch as he lies on his bed asleep. Attempting to assuage his fears, the two men inform Enoch that the "eternal God has sent us to you. And behold, you will ascend with us to heaven today" (1.8; trans. Andersen 1983). These men guide Enoch on a heavenly journey until the throne of God is visible, leaving Enoch there to enter into a new phase in his journey:

> And on the 10th heaven, Aravoth, I saw the view of the face of the Lord, like iron made burning hot in a fire and brought out, and it emits sparks and is incandescent. Thus even I saw the face of the Lord. But the face of the Lord is not to be talked about, it is so very marvelous and supremely awesome and supremely frightening. And who am I to give an account of the incomprehensible being of the Lord, and of his face, so extremely strange and indescribable? And how many are his commands, and his multiple voice, and the Lord's throne, supremely great and not made by hands, and the choir stalls all around him, the cherubim and the seraphim armies, and their never-silent singing. Who can give an account of his beautiful appearance, never changing and indescribable, and his great glory? And I fell down flat and did obeisance to the Lord. And the Lord, with his own mouth, said to me, "Be brave, Enoch! Don't be frightened! Stand up, and stand in front of my face forever." (22.1–5)

At this point, Michael lifts Enoch up in front of God's face, where God invites him to "join in" with "the Lord's glorious ones." Michael strips Enoch of his "earthly clothing," according to God's instructions, and Enoch notices his transformation: "And I looked at myself, and I had become like one of his glorious ones, and there was no observable difference" (22.10).

This account of Enoch's ascent in 2 *Enoch* displays the core themes and motifs that many scholars have used, with varying degrees and emphases, to trace a trajectory of "early Jewish mysticism" from apocalyptic literature to Hekhalot texts. These include a vision of God enthroned, certain terminology associated with that throne, Enoch's participation in the angelic liturgy, his angelification, and, finally, his enthronement ("And I placed for myself a throne, and I sat down on it"; 25.4).

The ascent narrative of 2 *Enoch* also highlights the journey and transformation of the pseudepigraphic seer, a theme shared in both apocalyptic and Hekhalot literature. Apocalyptic literature typically uses biblical heroes (e.g., Enoch, Abraham, Levi), while Hekhalot texts utilize early rabbinic figures (e.g., Rabbi Ishmael, Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Nehunya ben ha-Qanah) as *merkavah* visionaries. Through a series of interactions with otherworldly beings, the figure ascends to the throne of God, while receiving revelations of cosmological and eschatological significance. Upon entering the throne room, the seer observes and participates in the angelic liturgy ("their never-silent singing"), is transformed into angelic form ("I had become like one of his glorious ones, and there was no observable difference"), and sits upon a throne ("And I placed for myself a throne, and I sat down on it"). Some consider this transformation the heart of the "mystical" experience. Elliot Wolfson has refined this position, suggesting that the "enthronement" of the seer represents "a form of quasi-deification or angelification," what "most precisely qualifies these texts as mystical" (1994, 84; also 1993). Wolfson sees the enthronement of the visionary as a common link between apocalyptic and Hekhalot texts.

Following Scholem's basic paradigm, the pervasiveness of shared themes and motifs (e.g., *merkavah*, ascent, angels and angelification, liturgy, enthronement, related terminology) indicates for many scholars a continuous tradition of ecstatic, mystical experience. Christopher Rowland, for example, suggests that the reinterpretation of Ezekiel's *merkavah* vision was "probably not just the subject of learned study but a catalyst for visionary experience, in which expounders saw again what had appeared to the prophet, but in their own way and in a manner appropriate for their own time" (2010, 347). For Rowland and others, the goal of apocalyptic literature is to record the actual mystical experiences of the visionary, and the goal of Hekhalot literature is to record and prescribe how to repeat those experiences; both groups of texts essentially represent the same experiential paradigm, which is democratized in Hekhalot works.

In contrast to those who find a continuous trajectory of ecstatic experience, but fully cognizant of these patterns of similarity, Martha Himmelfarb offers a close reading of ascent narratives as variegated literary traditions. Himmelfarb has made the powerful case that there are significant differences and shifts from one body of literature to another—and sometimes even within those bodies of literature. In her reading, the ascent accounts found in Ezekiel, Enochic literature, and Hekhalot texts differ fundamentally in their details. Early apocalyptic works narrate the hero's passive rapture. Hekhalot literature, on the other hand, instructs the hearer on how to actively embark on the treacherous journey to the heavenly chariot—explicitly developing ritual language and thematizing the ritual recitation itself. Himmelfarb notes that, in mentions of ascent (or descent), Hekhalot texts "only occasionally" discuss heavens and generally lack "a full-scale narrative that describes the process of ascent"—distinguishing them from ascent depictions in apocalyptic literature. Himmelfarb contends that 3 *Enoch* remains an exception to this rule (1988, 80). Conversely, features common in Hekhalot texts—hostile angelic gatekeepers and instructions on the use of seals with these gatekeepers—are quite rare in apocalyptic literature (the *Ascension of Isaiah* is a notable exception). Thus, angels generally serve as guards in Hekhalot literature, while they typically serve as guides in apocalyptic texts.

Furthermore, differences exist not only between the two corpora (apocalyptic and Hekhalot), but also within the bounds of each corpus itself. For example, some ascent apocalypses contain visions of multilayered heavens (e.g., 2 *Enoch*, *Apocalypse of Abraham*), while others only depict a single heaven (e.g., *Similitudes of Enoch*, *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*). While some apocalypses idealize the visionary hero (e.g., *Book of the Watchers*), the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* depicts its hero as imperfect, making foolish blunders, "an ordinary soul that can serve as a model for all readers" (Himmelfarb 1993, 55). For Himmelfarb, outlining the cumulative differences between various ascent texts allows us to observe major structural shifts between them. Such shifts indicate rich literary strands amid both apocalypses and Hekhalot them, between which she sees no tannaitic bridge.

The field remains divided over how to explain the patterns of similarity between apocalyptic literature and the Hekhalot corpus—whether the two constitute a continuous trajectory, and whether the texts represent literary strands or witness to actual ecstatic experience. While the question of actual experience remains fundamentally unanswerable, the commonalities between these texts raise legitimate questions of continuity. At the same time, the rich diversity of these texts requires that any explanation of literary continuities must account for their very real discontinuities.

3. TEXTUALITY AND TEXTUAL PRACTICE IN THE STUDY OF EARLY JEWISH MYSTICISM

As we have seen, some scholars of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature and the later ascent materials found in the Hekhalot corpus have grown wary of approaching these texts as representations of private religious experience or even as straightforward prescriptions for ritual practice. For this tradition of scholarship, attention to the closely related issues of *textual production* and *literary representation* challenges the study of apocalyptic literature as "early Jewish mysticism." Hekhalot literature not only presents a conception of heavenly ascent different from that found in earlier apocalyptic writings, but also offers a markedly distinct approach to esoteric knowledge and textual practice. Hekhalot texts underscore proper ritual recitation as a means by which prospective seers might navigate the dangerous journey of heavenly ascent or, at times, highlight textual recitation of the journey as a ritual practice in itself. Apocalyptic texts, on the other hand, envision the public dissemination of the seer's vision as revealed proclamation from the divine king.

Even the most casual reader of early Jewish and Christian apocalypses will note the heavenly book or tablet as a recurring image. The motif appears across various Near Eastern literatures, including the Hebrew Bible, as well as in other types of early Jewish and Christian literature (Nickelsburg 2001, 478–80; Baynes 2012, 27–61). By the second century B.C.E., heavenly writings had come to play a pivotal role within the apocalyptic genre as a central object—indeed, medium—of revelation. Thus, in what appears to be the earliest extant apocalyptic work, *The Astronomical Book* (1 *En.* 72–82), the angel Uriel instructs Enoch to look

> "at these heavenly tablets, and read what is written on them, and learn every individual (fact)." And I looked at everything on the heavenly tablets, and I read everything that was written, and I learned everything.... all the deeds of men and all the sons of flesh that will be upon the earth until the generations of eternity.... And then I said, "Blessed is the man who dies righteous and pious, concerning whom no book of iniquity has been written, and against whom no guilt will be found." (1 *En.* 81:1–4; trans. Nickelsburg 2001, 333)

This passage provides early and clear evidence for the textualization of revelation that is at the heart of so many apocalyptic works. As elsewhere in apocalyptic literature (Dan 7:10, 10:21, 12:1; Rev 3:5, 20:12–13; 4 *Ezra* 6:20; 2 *Bar.* 24:1), the heavenly tablets revealed to Enoch record the verdicts—either favorable or condemnatory—to be meted out at the final judgment. This book of deeds is similar to the more deterministic books of fate that also figure in Second Temple literature (*Jub.* 1:26–29, 5:13–18;

4Q180 1, 3–4; 1QHᵃ ix.24; 4Q417 2 i.14–18), although infrequently within the apocalyptic genre itself (Baynes 2012, 109–34).

In addition to utilizing the heavenly book as a means of textualizing revelation, several apocalyptic and related works also glorify the scribal process that is imagined to produce such heavenly books of deeds. In the *Testament of Abraham*, a work more akin to apocalypses than to other "testaments" (Mueller 1992, 43), Abraham is treated to the scene of the heavenly tribunal in which a pair of angels records the righteous and sinful deeds of souls in two books during the patriarch's otherworldly journey to the places of judgment (*Test. Abr.* 12:4–13:14 A; cf. *Test. Abr.* 10:7–11 B). Significantly, a parallel scene found in the second recension of the *Testament* assigns the task of recording the deeds of those being judged to Enoch (*Test. Abr.* 11:1–10 B). The image of Enoch serving in the same role elsewhere assigned to an angelic scribe echoes the long-standing characterization of the famous seer in *The Book of the Watchers*, where he is likewise described as "scribe of righteousness" (1 *En.* 12:4, 15:1; also *Jub.* 4:23–24). The notion that a human might serve scribal functions in heaven, as he issues written communications among God, the angels, and human beings, complements the thoroughgoing association between visionary activity and scribal expertise embodied in the figure of Daniel (esp. Dan 5, 9:2, 12:4). The skills of writing, reading, and interpretation—alongside imagery associated with prophetic and priestly activity—are thus integral to the idealizing portraits of the visionary heroes of early apocalyptic works (Himmelfarb 1993, 23–25).

Some apocalypses develop this association between scribal expertise and access to secret knowledge recorded in heavenly books, scrolls, or tablets one step further by describing the process whereby their heroes produced written records of their otherworldly travels. Particularly noteworthy is the repeated mention in 2 *Enoch* of Enoch's writings in which "he wrote about his marvelous travels and what the heavens look like" (2 *En.* 23; cf. 2 *En.* 33:5–9, 64:5; 4 *Ezra* 14:19–26, 43–48). These books, written in the handwriting of the visionary and transmitted from generation to generation by their families and followers (2 *En.* 33:5–9), are undoubtedly meant to resemble the very apocalypses that readers hold in their hands. The veracity of the knowledge revealed in heaven to the scribal visionary is in this case transferred to the earthly text, which offers an authoritative account of specific elements of revealed knowledge. Ultimately, then, most early apocalypses do not demonstrate an interest in—and, in some cases, are deeply wary of—inviting the reader to imitate the visionary's journey, let alone to speculate about his private experience (Reed 2005, 24–57).

Several apocalypses in fact thematize their own status as publicly transmitted scripts that are to be read performatively before their audiences. Such directions for public recitation are reminiscent of the prophetic representation of the oracular utterance as a "royal" decree issued by God. Thus, Habakkuk announces, "the Lord answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and

does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay" (Hab 2:2–3; cf. Jer 36; Bar 1). The prophet delivers the divine message to an audience, which must in turn respond to it properly. This pattern is perhaps most pronounced in the prologue to the New Testament book of Revelation (1:1–8), which frames itself as well as the "letters" to the seven churches in Asia that it contains (1:11, 2:1–3:22) as a prophecy to be read out loud: "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near" (Rev 1:3). Revelation also constructs its seven "letters" as a collection of "proclamations" in the style of imperial edicts. The book thus imagines a communal setting in which a reader recites the text before an audience as public proclamation and as part of collective worship (Aune 1997, 28–29, 126–30). Similarly, the author of *4 Ezra* stresses the transmission of the visionary's writings to his contemporaries, although here the books are to be divided between those intended for the general community and those restricted to the "wise" (*4 Ezra* 14:19–26, 43–48). While most apocalypses do not index their performative function as divine messages intended for public recitation, this literature, broadly speaking, presents itself as texts to be read rather than ritual scripts to be enacted. It is, therefore, essential for scholars to recognize the fundamental difference between the practices of writing and public recitation that inform the discourse of textuality in the apocalypses, on the one hand, and ritual practices intended to induce ecstatic or mystical states of consciousness, on the other.

As we have noted, Scholem sought to bridge the divide between the Hekhalot corpus and the early apocalypses in an effort to root the Jewish mystical tradition in the oldest stages of Judaism. Scholars of Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity, however, have most often begun with the analytical challenges presented by apocalyptic literature and moved forward in time to Hekhalot literature in search of support for their "experientialist" interpretations. Stated differently, if Hekhalot literature can be read as instructions for praxis aimed at achieving heavenly ascent, angelification, enthronement, and even divinization, then this corpus might serve as "background" to the mysticism of the early apocalypses. But two significant obstacles stand in the way of this comparative enterprise. First, like the apocalypses, Hekhalot literature presents the scholar with the epistemological problem of moving from literary artifact to embodied practice and experience. Second—and perhaps more interestingly—close attention to the specific rhetoric of writing, reading, and recitation in Hekhalot texts reflects the significant historical developments in the textual culture of Judaism that had occurred in the course of late antiquity.

The Hekhalot text that most closely resembles the earlier apocalypses is *3 (Hebrew) Enoch* (§§1–80 in Schäfer 1981 = *Synopse*; trans. Alexander 1983). The introductory frame of this composition (*Synopse* §§1–3) employs technical vocabulary (e.g., *hekhalot* = heavenly palaces) and characters (e.g., Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha the High Priest) characteristic of Hekhalot literature. Yet, apart from its opening, the text is dominated by many of the central features of the apocalyptic genre, taking the

concerning the historical fate of Israel (Collins 1979). Moreover, the text seems to be in dialogue with older Enoch traditions and perhaps even incorporates textual materials from *The Book of the Watchers* (Reed 2001). *3 Enoch*, therefore, represents a kind of hybrid form, integrating motifs from Hekhalot literature into the apocalyptic form (Himmelfarb 1988, 98; Kuyt 1995, 161–63; Boustan 2005, 43–45).

In light of the unusually dense use of apocalyptic forms in *3 Enoch*, we ought not to be surprised that it is here, in this text, that we find the closest affinities to the conception of heavenly books characteristic of the earlier apocalypses. Thus, this rather atypical Hekhalot text offers the following vision of the heavenly courtroom described by Metatron to Rabbi Ishmael:

> Above the seraphim is a prince...Radweri'el YHWH is his name, and he is in charge of the archives. He takes out the chest of writings in which the book of records (*sefer zikhronot*) is kept, and brings it into the presence of the Holy One, blessed be he. He breaks the seals of the chest of writings, opens it, takes out the scrolls and puts them in the hand of the Holy One, blessed be he. The Holy One receives them from his hand and places them before the scribes, so that they might read them out to the Great Law Court which is in the height of the heaven of 'Aravot, in the presence of the heavenly household. (*Synopse* §43; trans. Alexander 1983, 281–82)

Much like the heavenly courtroom scenes in several early apocalypses discussed above, this passage offers the visionary—and thus the reader—a glimpse into the process of divine judgment in which angelic scribes record the righteous and sinful deeds of humanity in books to be used at the time of final judgment. Indeed, only several paragraphs later, *3 Enoch* connects its vision of the heavenly courtroom to the (by then) authoritative version of such scenes in the book of Daniel, explicitly citing the phrase "a court was held, and the books were opened" (Dan 7:10).

Such heavenly trial scenes and their interest in the scribal activities of God's angelic courtiers are found virtually nowhere else in Hekhalot literature, the other notable exception being the equally atypical "martyr-narrative" found in *Hekhalot Rabbati* (*Synopse* §§107–21). But, in both of these cases, these scenes are largely constructed from preexisting building-block materials found in either late rabbinic midrashim or contemporaneous Hebrew narrative literature (Boustan 2005, 182–97). Thus, despite the formal and thematic continuities between early Jewish and Christian apocalypses and early medieval texts like *3 Enoch*, we find this pattern of similarity precisely in that strand of Hekhalot literature least reflective of its novel emphasis on ritual techniques for achieving proximity to the divine.

By contrast, in those strata of the Hekhalot corpus that would seem to describe those forms of "mystical praxis" that some scholars wish to see behind the earlier apocalypses, we find a starkly different approach to such "textual practices" as writing, reading, and recitation. Here, scholastic or scribal activity is no longer situated primarily in the context of the heavenly realms, but represents ritual techniques transmitted with a community of initiates. This novel discourse of ritual power

participates in the broader scribalization of Jewish "magic" in late antiquity (Bohak 2008, 183–96, 283–85). Moreover, this conception of the acts of writing or, in other cases, recitation as ritually efficacious likely reflects the emergent scholastic norms that were increasingly coming to define the nature of religious authority and ritual expertise in late antiquity (Swartz 1996; Vidas 2013).

The detailed description of the "mystical" fellowship (havurah) found at the heart of *Hekhalot Rabbati* (*Synopse* §§198–268) is perhaps the best-known articulation of this new emphasis on the transmission of esoteric knowledge as indispensable for successful access to the heavenly realms (Schäfer 2009, 268–82). Embedded at various points in this composite account are brief narrative vignettes that purport to describe the historical context in which the master of secret lore Rabbi Nehunya ha-Qanah transmitted this knowledge to his various disciples. Scribal activities figure prominently within this imaginatively constructed social world.

As the narrative progresses, for instance, the reader learns that Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel has accused his colleague Rabbi Ishmael of having failed to transmit from their master a key piece of information necessary for completing the heavenly journey, that is, the names of the angelic guardians of the last of the seven palaces that make up the divine realm (*Synopse* §238). Greatly distressed by this accusation, Rabbi Ishmael seeks out his teacher, Rabbi Nehunya ha-Qanah, who implies that he has waited until now to reveal these names because of their special potency (*Synopse* §§239–40). The master then reconvenes the disciples to whom he had taught most but not all of the necessary information, instructing them as follows:

> "come stand on your feet, and each and every one of you—when the name of each [of the guardians of the seventh palace] goes forth from my mouth—kneel and fall upon your faces." Immediately, all the heroes of the fellowship and all the leaders of the academy came and stood on their feet before R. Nehunya ben ha-Qanah. And (when) he speaks, they fall upon their faces, while the scribes record. (*Synopse* §240; our trans., following MS Vatican 228; cf. T.-S. AS 142.94 in Schäfer 1984a, 76–81)

There are several notable features of this account that differ fundamentally from what we find in apocalyptic literature. Instruction within the disciple-circle is imagined to be oral, in keeping with its fictionalized rabbinic setting. Moreover, the group of scribes (soferim) tasked with recording the master's instructions appear to stand outside the inner circle of disciples. Indeed, on the whole, Hekhalot literature does not describe its rabbinic heroes as scribes or otherwise celebrate scribal identity, as do the early apocalypses (e.g., Enoch as prototypical scribe). Instead, this narrative seeks to demonstrate that ritual prescriptions can be recorded in writing and thus preserved for posterity. The instructional materials that make up the rest of the havurah-account are authorized not because they come from heaven, but because they successfully lead to heaven, as Rabbi Nehunya ha-Qanah's own journey to the merkavah demonstrates.

Other passages in the Hekhalot corpus present this literature not so much as a transcription of efficacious ritual techniques, but as texts to be recited. Thus, Himmelfarb has argued that, for the creators of Hekhalot literature, "[t]he actual performance of the acts is attributed to a mythic past, the era of the great rabbis of the Mishnah; recitation itself has become the ritual" (Himmelfarb 1993, 113). The introductory framework of the poorly redacted text known as *Hekhalot Zutarti* exemplifies this particular "register" of ritual discourse.

> If you wish to single yourself out in the world, so that the mystery of the world and the secrets of wisdom are revealed to you, recite this teaching (*mishnah*) and be careful with it until the day of your passing. Do not (seek to) comprehend what is after you and do not examine the sayings of your lips; (seek to) comprehend that which is in your own heart and keep silent, so that you may be worthy of the beauty of the divine chariot-throne (*merkavah*). Be careful with the glory of your Creator and do not "descend" to it. But if you do "descend" to it, do not take enjoyment from it—your fate will be to be driven from the world. *The glory of God: conceal the matter* [Prov 25:2, in adapted form], lest you be driven from the world! (*Synopse* §335; our trans., following MS Oxford 1531)

According to this programmatic statement, most people will never merit direct experience of the divine; and even those few who, through correct practice and proper discipline, do successfully encounter the glory of God are enjoined to keep their heavenly knowledge secret, or suffer the consequences. But the text—part warning label and part advertisement—also integrates a promise of power into its threat of danger. Knowledge of divine secrets and the power this knowledge confers are the fruit of ongoing and repeated engagement with Hekhalot texts. The passage's shrewd juxtaposition of the language of revelation with the rhetoric of secrecy is deftly calibrated to lend an air of authority and authenticity to the larger literature of which it is a part.

Significantly, however, this passage does not instruct the reader to engage in any of the ritual practices that are otherwise so characteristic of Hekhalot literature. The passage instead invests the very act of textual recitation with ritual power. The passage is thus striking for the way it points to the literariness of the Hekhalot texts themselves. This self-reflexive gesture suggests that, in the course of its literary evolution, Hekhalot literature took an interest in the potential ritual applications of its own textuality.

In this regard, Hekhalot units like this one broadly resemble the introductory instructions for communal recitation found at the opening of the Apocalypse of John. Yet there is no indication in apocalyptic texts that the public disclosure or reading of their narratives will serve as a ritual technique for ascending to the divine realm. While both groups of texts often convey a similarly consoling message regarding God's abiding presence in heaven and his enduring concern for his people, it is difficult to locate in the early apocalypses a comparable interest in ritual practice

as a path for encountering the divine. Thus, even if we think it productive to study Hekhalot literature through the analytical lens of mysticism—a matter very much open for debate—it seems wholly unwarranted to apply that category (even at its most expansive) to apocalyptic literature.

4. CONCLUSION

This essay has highlighted and explored the persistent—and vertiginous—gap between the literary artifacts that make up apocalyptic and Hekhalot literatures, on the one hand, and ritual practice and religious experience, on the other. We have suggested that accounts of continuity between the two corpora must be balanced by attention to differences in literary form and rhetorical aims. Rather than begin with a priori assumptions about the essential nature of mystical thought and practice, comparative work ought to give due weight to the shifting institutional and cultural contexts that produced these literatures and to fine-grained analysis of the conceptual and formal features that characterize specific works.

Yet, provided that appropriate care is taken with the textual evidence, scholarship need not confine itself to formal literary analysis. As public and socially meaningful expressions of Jewish and Christian piety, all of the texts discussed in this essay emerged from and participated in the creation and maintenance of specific religious cultures. In that respect, they must be studied not only as more or less authoritative texts, but also in relation to nontextual forms of religious life. Thus, we ought neither pit texts against practice nor ignore the literary texture of written artifacts in the search for the "lived experience" that supposedly lies beneath their surface. The textual practices that produced these literary artifacts offer historians of ancient Judaism and Christianity precious evidence for the dynamic process through which authoritative traditions as well as the norms and aspirations they encode were made and remade in the course of their reception and transmission. The integration of formal textual analysis with attention to the entire range of nontextual forms of expression, such as public reading and recitation, regimes of ascetic discipline, and architectural contexts and iconographic programs, can help to account for the capacity of these textual traditions to endure over time.

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