PETER SCHÄFER

GERSHOM SCHOLEM RECONSIDERED

THE AIM AND PURPOSE OF EARLY JEWISH MYSTICISM

THE TWELFTH SACKS LECTURE

OXFORD CENTRE FOR
POSTGRADUATE HEBREW STUDIES

PETER SCHÄFER

GERSHOM SCHOLEM RECONSIDERED

THE AIM AND PURPOSE OF EARLY JEWISH MYSTICISM

The Twelfth Sacks Lecture
delivered on 29th May 1985

OXFORD CENTRE FOR
POSTGRADUATE HEBREW STUDIES
1986

Published by
The Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies
45 St. Giles', Oxford, England

Phototypeset by Oxford Publishing Services, Oxford

Printed by Information Press Ltd., Oxford, England.

Gershom Scholem Reconsidered
The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism

Books have their own histories and this in a double sense of the word. To the extent that books are usually books about books, literature about literature, they have a history of origin. And to the extent that books are always directed towards readers, they have a history of reception. The author of a book, as Umberto Eco has impressively shown,[1] is in a double dialogue, i.e. in a dialogue with his material, and in a dialogue with his readers. His work is 'open' in two directions: backwards in regard to the author's reception of the material, and forwards in regard to the reception of the newly treated material by the reader.

There is hardly another book within Jewish scholarship which has had its own history in this double sense of the word to the same extent as Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. This book was the result of the author's dialogue with his material for some twenty years. Basically, it was produced in the second half of 1937 for the Hilda Strook Lectures of February 1938 at New York's Jewish Institute of Religion. We know this very precisely from Scholem's letter to Walter Benjamin of November 29, 1937: 'I am presently occupied with writing my lectures for New York, which I have to give in English. That is a very unusual task and takes much of my time. The art of writing short sentences has not up to now attracted my attention.'[2] The book form of these lectures first appeared in 1941, and in numerous editions in various languages it 'made history' in the truest sense of the word. That is, it founded the modern view of Jewish mysticism.[3]

In his foreword to the first English edition, of May 1941, Scholem describes very exactly how his book arose and how he wants it to be understood:

> . . . the task which confronted me necessitated a vast amount of spade-work in a field strewn with ruins and by no means ripe as yet for the constructive labors of the builder of a system. Both as to historical fact and philological analysis there was pioneer work to be done, often of the most primitive and elementary kind. Rapid bird's-eye syntheses and elaborate speculations on shaky premises had to give way to the more modest work of laying the secure foundations of valid generalization. Where others had either disdained close acquaintance with the sources of

> what they frequently rejected and condemned or erected some lofty edifice of speculation, I found myself constrained by circumstance and by inclination to perform the modest but necessary task of clearing the ground of much scattered debris and laying bare the outlines of a great and significant chapter in the history of Jewish religion.[4]

A few years later, in his famous essay 'Mi-Tokh Hirhurim 'al Ḥokhmat Yisra'el' (Reflections on the 'Wissenschaft des Judentums') in *Luaḥ ha-Areṣ, 1944–45*,[5] which unfortunately is known to most readers only in its shorter German version,[6] Scholem expressed himself more clearly on the others' against whom his book was directed. He also described his own method more exactly. His opponents are the representatives of the 'Wissenschaft des Judentums' of the nineteenth century who refused to acknowledge sources which did not correspond to their rationalistic concept of God, as well as those who, without solid knowledge of the sources, 'erected some lofty edifice of speculation'. In their individual ways, both are dangerous, for both destroy living Judaism on the basis of different presuppositions. Also, the method of destruction should be employed against both: 'Here new concepts and new categories, new intuition and new courage are needed: "Destruction of the destruction" [*hapalat ha-hapalah*], liquidation of the liquidation [*ḥisul ha-ḥisul*], and fearless use of historical criticism. . . .'[7] Like hardly anyone else in Jewish scholarship, Scholem recognized and concretely demonstrated that construction, i.e. scientific synthesis, is only possible through destruction and through the re-evaluation of material. The following citation is undoubtedly an exact description of Gershom Scholem's scholarly programme:

> We want to submerge ourselves in the research of detail and of the detail of the detail [*be-ḥeqer ha-perat u-ferat ha-perat*] . . . We search for the great light of the scholarly idea, which light, like the beams of the sun which glitter upon the water, enlightens details; and we know . . . that it only dwells in the details themselves[8]. . . . Woe to a scholarship which foregoes summaries, but a manifold woe to a scholarship [*oi lo shiv'atayim la-mada'*] in which summary precedes the analysis, clarification, and squeezing out [*miṣui*] of details.[9]

Scholem presented the synthesis he gained from destruction in his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, yet he certainly would be the last person to consider his own 'construction' as final and incontestable. The rigour of Scholem's historical thinking demands a constant testing of syntheses, including—indeed, especially—of his own. It is also self-evident that this testing can only occur on the basis of the material, that a dialogue with Scholem's outline is only made meaningful by means of a simultaneous and new dialogue with the material. Something that gives additional justification to our dialogue is the fact that, since the appearance of Scholem's book, the

textual situation has improved in the limited area which we shall consider in what follows.

As indicated in the title of this lecture, I shall limit myself here to one area of Jewish mysticism and thus to one chapter of Scholem's book. 'Early Jewish mysticism' is intended to mean the first mystical 'movement' of Judaism available in a complete literary system, that which Scholem characterised as *Merkavah* mysticism, i.e. the mysticism centring around the divine chariot described in Ezekiel 1. The type of literature ('Gattung') in which we find this mysticism is called *Hekhalot* literature, because it deals with the *hekhalot*, the heavenly 'halls' or 'palaces' through which the mystic passes in order to reach the divine throne. It is not accidental that the term *hekhal* is taken from the architecture of the temple where it designates the vestibule in front of the Holy of Holies. The dating of this early mysticism is controversial. Scholem decidedly postulated an early dating. He favoured the view that the oldest texts go back to the second century, and were redacted in the fourth or fifth century CE.[10]

What is concretely meant by 'aim and purpose' of early Jewish mysticism? First and foremost the question of the object or the objects of these mystical ideas in Judaism. What are these texts about, and what does the mystic want to achieve? Since the texts are not theological tractates which pose problems and discuss them in a well-ordered discourse, these questions are not easy to answer. On the contrary, the texts present a bewildering variety of, in part unordered, in part fragmentary, 'materials' through which the contemporary reader can only make his way with difficulty. Thus it will be part of our task to ascertain whether there is such a thing as a 'focus' in the texts, a central statement which informs us of the intentions of the authors.

Scholem's answer to this question is unequivocal and very definite in its formulation:

> What was the central theme of these oldest of mystical doctrines within the framework of Judaism? No doubts are possible on this point: the earliest Jewish mysticism is throne-mysticism. Its essence is not absorbed contemplation of God's true nature, but perception of His appearance on the throne, as described by Ezekiel, and cognition of the mysteries of the celestial throne-world.[11]

It is thus clear that for Scholem the ascent of the Merkavah mystic through the seven palaces (*hekhalot*) to the divine throne is the main theme of the Hekhalot literature. Preparatory ascetic exercises, and numinous hymns which put the heavenly wanderer in a trance, serve this ascent, as do certain magical practices which aid the adept (initiate) in overcoming the dangers of his ascent. Having arrived at the goal of his journey and desire he sees the hierarchy of the heavenly court and, in its midst, God as enthroned King:

> We are dealing here with a Judaized form of cosmocratorial mysticism concerning the divine King (or Emperor). . . . Not without good reason has Graetz called the religious belief of the Merkabah mystic 'Basileomorphism'. . . . The aspects of God which are really relevant to the religious feeling of the epoch are His majesty and the aura of sublimity and solemnity which surrounds Him. On the other hand, there is a complete absence of any sentiment of divine immanence. . . . The fact is that the true and spontaneous feeling of the Merkabah mystic knows nothing of divine immanence: the infinite gulf between the soul and God the King on His throne is not even bridged at the climax of mystical ecstasy. Not only is there for the mystic no divine immanence, there is also almost no love of God. What there is of love in the relationship between the Jewish mystic and his God belongs to a much later period and has nothing to do with our present subject.[12]

In addition to offering a vision of God, the ascent of the Merkavah mystic serves the purpose of penetrating the mystery of Israel's future, and thus of the messianic redemption. Scholem expressly states that 'all' texts of the Hekhalot literature

> contain varying descriptions of the end of the world, and calculations of the date set for the redemption. . . . It is safe to say that what might be termed apocalyptic nostalgia was among the most powerful motive-forces of the whole Merkabah mysticism. . . . The depressing conditions of the period, the beginning of the era of persecution by the Church since the fourth century, directed the religious interests of the mystics towards the higher world of the Merkabah; from the world of history the mystic turns to the prehistoric period of creation, from whose vision he seeks consolation, or towards the post-history of redemption.[13]

In comparison with these two central themes of the Hekhalot literature (cosmocratorial mysticism and the knowledge of Israel's future), all other elements are secondary. This is true of cosmology, i.e. knowledge of the orderings of the cosmos, as well as of certain theurgic or magic practices such as are found in the 'adjuration of the Prince of the Torah' (*śar ha-torah*). These practices provide for a comprehensive knowledge of the Torah and are intended to prevent the Torah's being forgotten. The latter, according to Scholem, are

> matters which to the Hekhalot mystics were important but not vital.[14]

These are, I hope without grave distortions, Scholem's most important statements on our subject. May I add that for Scholem it was apparently self-evident that the texts of the Hekhalot literature, at least in their origin, reflect very concrete ecstatic experiences:

> They are essentially descriptions of a genuine religious experience for which no sanction is sought in the Bible.[15]

It is only at a later stage that the genuinely religious movement loses its inner dynamic, and 'degenerates into mere literature'.[16] It appears that Scholem saw a close and causal connection between the degeneration of ecstatic Merkavah mysticism and the growth of the magical element in it.

I would now like to re-examine, on the basis of the sources, some essential points in the picture of Merkavah mysticism as sketched by Scholem.

1 The Adjuration

It is certainly correct that the Hekhalot literature transmits numerous descriptions of the heavenly journey. Thus the best known of the Hekhalot texts, the so-called *Greater Hekhalot*, begin directly and without any introduction with the question: 'R. Ishmael said: What are the hymns which should be recited by him who wishes to behold the vision of the *Merkavah*, to ascend in peace and to descend in peace?'[17] The journey itself is most extensively described in regard to the ascent. That is, a detailed account is given of the dangers which threaten the adept, and of how he can overcome them. The most important 'luggage' of the mystic consists of magic seals which he must present to the angelic gatekeepers at the entrance to the seven palaces so that they let him pass by without hindrance. The angelic gatekeepers of the seventh palace are described, for example, in the following way:[18]

> Their horses are horses of gloom,
> horses of the shadow of death,
> horses of darkness,
> horses of fire,
> horses of blood,
> horses of hail,
> horses of iron,
> horses of fog;
> the horses upon which they ride,
> which stand before feeding troughs of fire,
> filled with glowing juniper coals
> . . .
> Rivers of fire are beside their feeding troughs
> . . .
> and a cloud is above their heads
> which drips blood
> above their [the gatekeepers'] heads and those of their horses.

In spite of such vivid descriptions, it is surprising, when one surveys the entirety of the Hekhalot literature, how few reports there really are of

the ascent as actually carried out. Anyone who reads the texts edited in the *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* in an unbiased way, and without having the history of research inaugurated by Scholem in mind, will hardly conclude that it is precisely the ascent to the Merkavah which forms the centre of interest of the authors of this literature. It seems to me that an entirely different impression will force itself upon the reader. That is, we are concerned here with eminently magical texts which deal with forceful adjurations. The entire literature is permeated by such adjurations, and the means by which these adjurations are carried out are the same as those needed for a successful completion of the heavenly journey: the mentioning of certain names, and the displaying of seals which also basically consist of names. The objects of the adjuration are always angels. However, one cannot always decide with certainty whether the person making the adjuration is addressing himself to God or to an angel, because many names may refer either to God or to an angel, or even to both. Nevertheless, the purpose of the adjuration is clear. It is to bring the angel down to earth in what is, in effect, a reverse heavenly journey: instead of the mystic ascending to heaven, the angel descends to earth to carry out the mystic's wishes.

There can be no doubt about the aim of the adjuration in almost all these texts. In the overwhelming majority of cases it is a comprehensive knowledge of the Torah, and the desire to be protected conclusively and for ever from forgetting the Torah. The following is a classic example of such an adjuration:[19]

> Let him conjure up those [previously mentioned] twelve [angels]
> by the name Yofiel:
> he is the splendour of [heaven on] high because of the permission of his King;
> by the name Sarakhiel:
> he belongs to the princes of the Chariot;
> by the name Sahadariel:
> he is a beloved prince;
> by the name Ḥasdiel:
> six hours every day he is called to the divine power.
> Let him again conjure up the last [named] four princes
> by the great seal and the great oath,
> by the name AZBWGH:
> he is the great seal;
> and by the name ṢWRṬQ:
> the holy name and the awesome crown.
> After the course of twelve days
> he will reach all the types of the Torah he desires,
> whether that is Bible,
> whether that is Mishnah,

whether that is Talmud,
whether it is even the vision of the Chariot.
. . .
R. Ishmael said:
So spoke R. Akiva in the name of R. Eliezer the Elder:
Blessed is he
to whom the merit of his fathers comes as aid
and whom the righteousness of his parents assists:
he will avail himself of this crown and this seal,
[the angels] will be bound up with him,
and he will rise up proudly in the sublimity of the Torah.

Texts which transmit proper formulas which are obviously meant for repeated usage show how central the adjuration ritual is within the Hekhalot literature. One such formula begins with the question:[20]

With what does one conjure the Prince of the Countenance [*śar ha-panim*]
to descend onto the earth
[and] to reveal to man the mysteries above and below,
the hidden [sources] of wisdom
and the shrewdness of knowledge?

Even if the Torah is not expressly mentioned here, there can be no doubt that 'mysteries', 'hidden [sources] of wisdom', and 'shrewdness of knowledge' mean nothing else than the Torah and the complete knowledge of the Torah.

The adjuration which follows is quite artistically structured. First the conjurer in descending order makes use of a mysterious name with forty-two letters, then he employs fourteen names which are engraved on the four sides of the divine throne, on the four crowns of the *ofannim*, and finally even (the last two) upon the crown of God. Yet even these names are not sufficient. The mystic must also trouble the five names 'which hover above the throne of glory',[21] and finally even the most important and mysterious angelic name which, with the exception of one letter, is identical to the divine Tetragrammaton. The reader, who after these unending adjurations waits with suspense to see what will happen, is now disappointed. At the end, the text only informs him of how to rid oneself of the angel which has been successfully conjured up, without being hurt by it, i.e. without its doing more with its 'unchained' power than one desires: revealing 'the mysteries of insight and the shrewdness of knowledge.'[22]

It is self-evident that the mystic can only execute such an adjuration in a condition of absolute physical and cultic purity, unless he wants to take the risk of endangering most severely himself and his environment, yes, even—as is sometimes stated—the entire world. Numerous texts deal with the preparatory rituals to which the initiate must subject himself:[23]

Whoever [wants to] be bound up with the Prince of the Torah,
let him wash his outer- and undergarments,
let him take a major bath of immersion
because of the danger of becoming unclean through pollution,
let him enter and sit for twelve days in a room or upper chamber;
let him neither exit nor enter,
eat nor drink except from evening to evening,
so that he may eat his bread in a state of purity,
the bread of his hands,
and drink [pure] water
and not taste any vegetables. . .

As far as I can see, the great majority of these preparatory rites, if not all of them, are connected to the adjuration ritual and not, as Scholem maintained,[24] to the heavenly journey. Scholem did not appeal to the texts of the Hekhalot literature for his assertion, but to the Babylonian Gaon Hai ben Sherira (*c.* 1000 CE), who was the first to establish a relationship between the preparatory rites and the heavenly journey of the Merkavah mystic.[25] It thus appears that Hai Gaon was the source of a decisive misunderstanding of the Hekhalot literature on the part of Scholem, and thus also for the modern reception of this literature.[26]

The examples cited up to now should suffice to show that Scholem's assessment of Merkavah mysticism is fixed too one-sidedly upon the heavenly journey. It is not the heavenly journey which is at the centre of this mysticism, with adjuration on the edge, but rather the reverse. Magical adjuration is a thread woven throughout the entire Hekhalot literature. This is true to such an extent that a heavenly journey may even culminate in an adjuration. Thus it is stated in the *Lesser Hekhalot*, of the mystic who has arrived at the seventh palace:

He is set upon the lap of ABṬḤ, the Lord, the God of Israel,
on the lap of AZBWGH, the Lord, the God of Israel,

and he is summoned to say: 'Ask your question!', and the answer of the adept is:[27]

May it be pleasing before you, Lord, God of Israel,
our God and the God of our fathers, . . .
that you grant me grace and favour
from your throne of glory and before all your servants,
that you bind unto me [=place at my disposal]
all your servants to do this and that . . .

Characteristically, what the adept concretely demands of God's servants is not enlarged upon: he receives absolute power over the angels and can do whatever he wants. Even if this connection of heavenly journey with

adjuration is not very frequent,[28] it nevertheless confirms the importance of adjuration in the spectrum of the Hekhalot tradition.

2 The Heavenly Journey

As our next step, let us now examine more closely those texts whose subject is the ascent of the Merkavah mystic. What is the aim of this heavenly journey? Is it, as Scholem presumes, exclusively or at least primarily the vision of God on his throne? Above all, is Scholem's conclusion valid: that Merkavah mysticism is cosmocratorial mysticism, informed by a concept of God as absolutely transcendent, in effect unattainable by man, and in whom all elements of loving affection for man are lacking?

The first surprising result of an examination of the texts is that the ascent accounts say almost nothing at all about what the mystic actually sees when he finally arrives at the goal of his wishes. The reader, who has followed the adept in his dangerous and toilsome ascent through the seven palaces, and whose expectations have been greatly raised, is rather disappointed. For example, when the mystic, almost fainting and supported by an angel, passes through the door to the seventh palace, the following is stated in the *Greater Hekhalot*:

> Fear not, son of the beloved seed [=Israel].
> Enter and look upon the king in his beauty.
> You will neither be killed nor burned to death![29]

Yet a description of the king on his throne is not given now. Rather, a hymn follows, to be exact, the hymn which the throne of glory itself recites daily before God.[30]

The following is a similar, poetically formulated, example from the *Lesser Hekhalot*:[31]

> 'Let everyone who is worthy to see the king in his beauty enter and see.'
> The *ofannim* of power embrace him,
> the cherubim of splendour kiss him,
> the [holy] creatures carry him,
> the [planet] Venus dances before him,
> the *ḥashmal* sings before him,
> the lively wind of brightness bears him,
> until they raise him up and set him down before the throne of glory.
> However, he looks and sees the king in his beauty,
> the glorious king[32]
> the watchful king,
> the exalted king . . .

That is, the vision again passes over to a doxology of God, and it is of special importance in this connexion that some of the epithets by no means describe

a cosmocrator; for example, God is called 'humble king', 'gentle king', 'spotless king', 'pious king', and even 'miserable king'.[33]

To formulate matters more precisely: the ascent does not culminate in a vision, but rather in the Merkavah mystic's participation in the heavenly liturgy. In the so-called Third Book of Enoch, R. Ishmael describes his ascent to the throne of glory. Having arrived in the seventh palace, he is so frightened by a view of the 'Princes of the Chariot' that he falls down in a faint:[34]

> At once Metatron, Prince of the Divine Presence,
> came and revived me and raised me to my feet,
> but still I had not strength enough
> to sing a hymn before the glorious throne
> of the glorious king,
> the mightiest of kings,
> the most splendid of potentates,
> until an hour had passed.
> But after an hour the Holy One, blessed be he, opened to me
> gates of *Shekhinah*,
> gates of peace,
> gates of wisdom,
> gates of strength,
> gates of might,
> gates of speech,
> gates of song,
> gates of sanctifying praise,
> gates of chant.
> He enlightened my eyes and my heart
> to utter psalm,
> praise,
> jubilation,
> thanksgiving,
> song,
> glory,
> majesty,
> laud,
> and strength.
> And when I opened my mouth
> and sang praises before the throne of glory
> the holy creatures below the throne of glory and above the throne responded after me, saying,
> Holy, holy, holy [Isa 6:3]
> and,

Blessed be the glory of the Lord in his dwelling place [Ezek 3:12]

The Merkavah mystic participates in the liturgy of the heavenly court. Significantly, it is not he who joins the singing of the angels. Rather, the angels answer his singing, which is infused in him by God, with the Trisagion of Isaiah 6:3 and with Ezekiel 3:12, thus with the *qedushah* of the synagogue's liturgy. The heavenly liturgy is thus nothing but the liturgy which is performed on the earth in synagogues:[35]

Blessed are you [pl.] unto heaven and earth,
you who ascend to the Chariot,
when you tell and proclaim to my sons
what I do at the morning, afternoon, and evening prayer,
on every day and at every hour,
when Israel speaks the 'Holy, [holy, holy]' before me.
Teach them and tell them:
Raise your eyes to heaven opposite your house of prayer
when you speak the 'Holy, [holy, holy]' before me.
For I have no joy in my world,[36]
which I created,
except[37] at the hour in which your eyes are raised to my eyes,
and my eyes to your eyes,
[namely] in the hour in which you speak before me
the 'Holy, [holy, holy]'!

Perhaps one can proceed one step further and conclude from these and similar texts that the Merkavah mystic is none other than an emissary of the earthly congregation, who not only assures Israel of the communion with God carried out in the daily liturgy, but also assures God of the communion with his people Israel. The heavenly liturgy in and of itself is incomplete and imperfect; it requires the participation of Israel. The Merkavah mystic represents in his person the participation of Israel in the heavenly liturgy and simultaneously confirms for the earthly congregation that it stands in direct contact with God in its synagogue liturgy, a contact which God needs just as much as Israel does. For this reason it is stated in various places that God 'has a desire'[38] for Merkavah mystics and longs for them. The eschatological element in the Hekhalot literature also belongs to this context:

Tutrusiai, the Lord, the God of Israel,
longs for and keeps watch [for the Merkavah mystic],
just as he keeps watch for the redemption, and for the time of salvation
which has been preserved for Israel since the destruction of the last Temple.

When will he ascend[39]
who ascends to the Chariot?
When will he view the heavenly majesty?
When will he hear the end of salvation?
When will he see what no eye has ever seen?
When will he [again] descend[40]
and proclaim [this] to the seed of Abraham, his beloved?[41]

Here the concern is more with a mutual confirmation of the redemption (the mystic's ascent is, both for Israel and for God himself, a pledge of the expected redemption, or even the redemption itself), than with apocalyptic visions or calculations of the end. With one exception—in the Third Book of Enoch, which is closer to the classical apocalyptic tradition[42]—this is, as far as I know, the only passage in the Hekhalot literature which explicitly mentions the redemption.[43] Thus, Scholem's assertion that 'apocalyptic nostalgia was among the most powerful motive-forces of the whole Merkabah mysticism'[44] is questionable.

Finally, a last and crucial point derives from the texts just cited. There can be no doubt that, in contrast to Scholem's presentation, the aspect of God's love for Israel and Israel's for God plays a very decisive roll precisely in the Hekhalot literature. The ascent of the Merkavah mystic is an expression of the love between God and Israel,

for no time is like this time,
since my soul looks forward to seeing you [pl.].
No time is like this time,
since your love clings closely to my heart.[45]

God's answer to the liturgy of Israel, which culminates in the Trisagion, is nothing else than overflowing love. It is also the task of the Merkavah mystic to proclaim this love of God to the earthly community. The God of Merkavah mysticism is by no means the unapproachable cosmocrator who remains impassive throughout the heavenly ritual. Rather, he is the God who loves his people Israel:[46]

Bear witness to them of what testimony you [pl.] see in me,
of what I do unto the face of Jacob your father,
which is engraved unto me upon the throne of my glory.
For in the hour when you say before me 'Holy, [holy, holy]',
I stoop over it,
embrace, fondle and kiss it,
and my hands are upon his arms,[47]
three times, corresponding to the three times
you speak before me the 'Holy, [holy, holy]' . . .

3 The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism

Up to now we have sketched two elements, which certainly are not the only ones, yet are fundamental to Merkavah mysticism: the heavenly journey, culminating in the *liturgy*, a journey which is an expression of the special love between God and Israel; and the *Torah*, made available through adjuration. Without a doubt, the decisive aim of the Merkavah mystic, as we encounter him in the Hekhalot literature, is to mediate heavenly and earthly liturgy, as well as to make the Torah available.

However, when we ask what are the aim and purpose of early Jewish mysticism, we are requesting more than a mere description of what takes place in the Hekhalot literature. We would like to go one step further and ask: What world view is expressed in these texts? And above all: What kind of people were the authors of these texts? Can we describe the group which lies behind these texts, and can we differentiate it from other groups? The texts themselves tell us almost nothing about these matters—neither about their authors, nor their addressees, and even less about their place and time. They begin directly with their descriptions and narratives, giving the appearance that it is self-evident where they come from and for whom they are written. Thus for the most part we are dependent upon conjectures and indirect conclusions.

A first conclusion, I think, is apparent. In regard to the heavenly journey, and especially in regard to the adjuration, the concern is with a direct and unobstructed contact with God or with his angel. God can be reached directly, fast and without detours. In both cases, the means of achieving this is magic. The world view which informs these texts is thus one which is deeply magical. The authors of the Hekhalot literature believed in the power of magic and attempted to integrate magic into Judaism. The central elements of Jewish life—worship and the study of the Torah—are determined, in these mystics' understanding of the world, by the power of magic.

It is clear that we find elements of magic in the so-called classical 'Rabbinic' Judaism, as determined by Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash and Targum. Yet it is just as clear that these elements do not dominate there. The radicalism of the magical world view found in the Hekhalot literature has no parallel in classical Rabbinic literature. In spite of all the attempts by Scholem and his successors[48] to emphasize the connections between the Rabbinic and the Hekhalot literatures, and to assign both to a main stream of Jewish mysticism flowing from apocalyptic to the Kabbalah, we should rather insist on the differences between them.

A glance at the literary peculiarities of the Hekhalot literature is helpful in working out these differences, and thus the peculiar character of Merkavah mysticism. In contrast to Rabbinic literature, which deals exclusively—

directly or indirectly—with the interpretation of the Bible, there are very few references to the Bible in the Hekhalot literature.[49] While one can describe Rabbinic literature in all its aspects as a dynamic interplay between scripture and tradition, between the written and the oral Torah, precisely the opposite holds for the Hekhalot literature. In spite of the fact that scriptural proofs are sometimes (though only seldom) employed, the Hekhalot literature appears to be basically independent of the Bible. To formulate it even more sharply: it appears to be autonomous.

It is obvious that a concept of revelation is expressed in the Hekhalot literature which is different from that of classical Rabbinical literature. The difference is not so much that there is another and new revelation, but lies in the way in which the revelation can be executed in the world. The way of the rabbis is that of scriptural interpretation. The Torah was once revealed on Mount Sinai, and it is now found on earth in the hands of people whose task it is to put it into practice by interpreting it ever anew. A famous midrash expresses it this way:[50]

> Another explanation [of the Biblical verse] 'For this commandment [which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off]: It is not in heaven' [Deut 30: 11–12]: Moses spoke to them [=Israel] [saying,] Do not say: Another Moses will rise and bring us a different Torah from heaven. Therefore I proclaim to you: 'It is not in heaven', [this means] that none of it has remained behind in heaven.

The Merkavah mystics of the Hekhalot literature do not say that they are bringing down a different Torah from heaven. Yet they do maintain that the Torah reaches people in a different way, i.e. not by exegesis, but by magical adjuration. Precisely this is the decisive statement of the so-called *śar ha-torah* ('Prince of the Torah') section of the *Greater Hekhalot*. God says to Israel:[51]

> You [pl.] are glad, but my servants are grieved
> because this is a mystery from the mysteries
> [which] leave my treasury.
> All your schools [flourish] like fatted calves,[52]
> not through toil, not through labour,
> but through the name of this seal
> and through mentioning the awesome crown . . .
> The servants of the accuser,
> the greatest of the ministering angels,
> quarrelled with me in a severe quarrel.[53]
> Here is his rejoinder:
>
> This mystery may not leave your [sing.] treasury,
> this secret knowledge your storerooms!
> Do not make flesh and blood similar to us.

Do not favour the children of men instead of us.
Let them toil with the Torah,
just as they toiled with the Torah
in all [previous] generations [so let them also] in the future.
Let them fulfil it with exertion and great vexation.

Here we have the difference from classical Rabbinic literature. The Rabbinic academy toils and labours mightily with the Torah. It attempts—often in vain—to understand and fulfil it; it disputes about its meaning; it arrives at various interpretations. In contrast, the 'school' of the Merkavah mystic possesses the Torah through one single act of knowledge, i.e. with the help of the 'great seal' and the 'awesome crown'. Thus theurgic means are employed, with no exertion, no toil. In doing this, the Merkavah mystic becomes lord of the *entire* Torah. His knowledge, occurring all at once, is the key—a magic key in the truest sense of the word—to the entire fulness of the Torah in all its details. From now on there can no longer be any disagreement about the proper interpretation, no quarrelling among the scholars.

The Merkavah mystic thus maintains that he is already in full and undivided possession of revelation here on earth. This is a goal which Rabbinic Judaism only expected of the messianic period. Perhaps this is the reason we hear so little in the Hekhalot literature about the redemption and the Messiah. In the world view of the Merkavah mystic, a redemption is actually superfluous. His own knowledge enables him to differentiate between good and evil:[54]

Greatest of all[55] is the fact
that he sees and recognizes all the deeds of men,
even when they do them in the chambers of the chambers,
whether they are good,
or whether they are corrupt deeds.
If a man steals,
he knows it and recognizes him.
If one commits adultery,
he knows it and recognizes him.
If one murders,
he knows it and recognizes him.
If one is suspected [of having sexual intercourse] with a menstruous woman,
he knows it and recognizes him.
If one spreads vile gossip,
he knows it and recognizes him. . . .

Greatest of all is the fact
that he is set aside from all men,

feared in[56] all his characteristics,
and honoured by the heavenly and the earthly ones.
Everyone who tries
to lay him low,
evil and grievous blows
fall upon him from heaven.
And against everyone
who shamelessly raises a hand against him—
against him the heavenly court raises a hand.

Greatest of all is the fact
that all creatures before him are like silver before the silversmith,
who perceives
which silver has been refined,
which silver is impure,
and which silver is pure.
He even sees into the family—
how many bastards there are in the family,
how many sons sired during menstruation,
how many with crushed testicles,
how many castrated ones,
how many slaves,
how many sons of uncircumcised [fathers].

The Merkavah mystic is the chosen one of God to whom messianic qualities are ascribed. The concern for purity of the family is especially significant, for this is traditionally one of the major preoccupations of the Messiah or of his predecessor, Elijah. The redemption does not occur in the world to come, but here and now.

This leads us to the question of the circles which composed this literature, or who stood behind the authors of these texts. I believe it is quite obvious that they cannot be the same rabbis who wrote the Mishnah, Talmud and Midrash. The world view of the Merkavah mystics, as far as we can fathom it, is too different from that of the rabbis. Another argument may be adduced, which in turn derives from the literary character of the texts. Even a glance at the Hekhalot literature shows that almost every smaller literary unit is introduced by the formula: 'R. Ishmael said', or 'R. Akiva said'. These two rabbis are cited almost exclusively. That is to say, this literature presents itself as if it had been written and authorized by rabbis, but it is quite clear that it was not. In other words, we are concerned here with a type of *pseudepigraphical literature* which is related to Rabbinic literature in a way similar to that by which the biblical pseudepigrapha are related to the Bible. Our authors are not rabbis, but they attach great importance to the

fact that what they say is authorized by the rabbis. The Torah of which they take possession is the Torah of Moses; the ascent which they perform is the ascent of Moses, R. Akiva and R. Ishmael. They maintain that the new things they have to say are not new. They are no different from what Moses, Ishmael and Akiva did and said.

The Hekhalot literature is thus not a literature of the rabbis, yet it seeks to stand in continuity with the Rabbinic literature. For this reason it appears quite improbable to me that the goals and ideals propagated in this literature were developed at the same time as those of Rabbinic Judaism in the form of Mishnah, Talmud and Midrash. In other words: The completely pseudepigraphical character of the Hekhalot literature is an important argument for the assertion that this literature is in fact a post-Rabbinic phenomenon. It is clear that individual parallels from Rabbinic literature can be made to the ideas of Merkavah mysticism. Yet on the whole, little can be said for the assertion that Merkavah mysticism is a product of Rabbinic Judaism, let alone early Rabbinic Judaism, as Scholem presupposes.

In conclusion, let me mention one last point, the question of the relationship between concrete ecstatic experience and literature. As I have noted, Scholem was certain that we can ascertain a development from ecstacy to literature, and that ecstatic experience degenerated to 'mere' literature. This, too, however, appears problematical when we view the entirety of the Hekhalot literature. Too often we hear of the 'book' in which all the mysteries are written,[57] and which one should learn and not forget.[58] The text which is employed in most manuscripts as an introductory paragraph in the *Lesser Hekhalot* begins:[59]

> If you wish to be singled out in the world,
> that the mysteries of the world
> and the hidden depths of wisdom
> be revealed to you,
> learn this mishnah. . . .

Whoever wants to be bound up with the 'Prince of the Torah', so the *Major Hekhalot* tells us, must wash his clothes, take baths of immersion, fast and then recite[60] three times daily after the Eighteen Benedictions the 'midrash of the Prince of the Torah'.[61] Directly after the ascent account cited above, which culminates in an adjuration, the conclusion states: 'Learn this mishnah every day after the Eighteen Benedictions'.[62] In a fragment of an otherwise unknown Hekhalot text, the Merkavah mystic is expressly informed that nothing harmful can happen to him when he ascends and descends if he only behaves himself properly, 'for on the scroll [*megillah*] I have disclosed it to you'.[63]

Such texts and others similar to them make it appear quite improbable that we can get behind the literary state of the Hekhalot *literature* to Merkavah

mysticism as an ecstatic phenomenon. The question must even be raised whether 'ecstatic experience' adequately describes the 'original' Merkavah mysticism, as Scholem presupposed. The Merkavah mystic to whom the Hekhalot literature is addressed does not expect to ascend to heaven in ecstasy and makes no claim to have done so. Rather, by means of magical and theurgic practices he repeats the heavenly journey of his heroes, Moses, Ishmael and Akiva. This is the point where the heavenly journey and adjuration meet. Like adjuration, the heavenly journey is a ritual, so to speak a liturgical act. The texts are instructions, formulas which can be passed on and repeated as often as desired. In the truest sense of the word, they are the 'Mishnah' of the Merkavah mystics.

A final possible conclusion results from this. The conjecture cannot be dismissed, and several indications favour it,[64] that the context in which this ritual of adjuration and the heavenly journey took place was the synagogue liturgy.

What, then, remains after all this? In summary, I would say the following. The Hekhalot literature is an expression of how an elite post-Rabbinic group of scholars understood the world and reality. They were people who, through the fantasy of the heavenly journey and through magical adjuration, wanted to proceed to God directly or to force God down to earth. The aim of this theurgic ritual was the confirmation of communion with God and of the love of God, as well as the complete knowledge of revelation. This was for the purpose of attaining the redemption of Israel here and now, on this earth and in this time.

But any attempt to reconstruct early Jewish mysticism in its own place and time reveals only part of the historical reality. Another, and probably more important or influential part, is the history of its reception in circles different from those we call 'scholarly'. To illustrate this, let me conclude with a very impressive piece of Milton's *Paradise Lost:*[65]

> And long he wanderd, till at last a gleame
> Of dawning light turnd thither-ward in haste
> His travell'd steps; farr distant he descries
> Ascending by degrees magnificent
> Up to the wall of Heaven a Structure high,
> At top whereof, but farr more rich appeerd
> The work as of a Kingly Palace Gate
> With Frontispice of Diamond and Gold
> Imbellisht, thick with sparkling orient Gemmes
> The Portal shon, inimitable on Earth
> By Model, or by shading Pencil drawn.
> The stairs were such as whereon Jacob saw
> Angels ascending, bands

Of Guardians bright, when he from Esau fled
To Padan-Aram in the field of Luz,
Dreaming by night under the open Skie,
And waking cri'd, This is the Gate of Heav'n.
Each stair mysteriously was meant, nor stood
There alwayes, but drawn up to Heav'n sometimes
Viewless, and underneath a bright Sea flow'd
Of Jasper, or of liquid Pearle, wheron
Who after came from Earth, sayling arriv'd,
Wafted by Angels, or flew o'er the Lake
Rapt in a Chariot drawn by fiery Steeds.

NOTES

1. *The Role of the Reader*, Bloomington, Ind. 1979; *Opera aperta*, Milan ^{2}1967 (^{1}1962) = *Das offene Kunstwerk*, Frankfurt a.M. ^{2}1977 (^{1}1973).

2. W. Benjamin and G. Scholem, *Briefwechsel 1933–1940*, ed. G. Scholem, Frankfurt a.M. 1980, pp. 254 f.

3. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York ^{3}1954 = London ^{3}1955 (^{1}1941, ^{2}1946). German translation according to the third English edition, but with some modifications, Zurich 1957 (reprint Frankfurt a.M. 1967). According to the foreword to the first English edition, the second chapter (on 'Merkavah Mysticism and Jewish Gnosticism') as well as the third chapter (on 'Hasidim in Medieval Germany') were not a part of the Strook Lectures. Rather, they 'were given upon other occasions' (p. VII). However, they definitely were finished in May of 1941.

4. *Major Trends*, p. VII.

5. Now reprinted in *Devarim be-Go* (Explications and Implications), vol. II, Tel Aviv 1982, pp. 385–403 (Hebrew).

6. 'Wissenschaft vom Judentum einst und jetzt', *Bulletin des Leo Baeck Instituts* 9, 1960, pp. 10–20; reprinted in *Judaica* I, Frankfurt a.M. 1963, pp. 147–64.

7. *Devarim be-Go*, p. 399.

8. *Devarim be-Go*, p. 401.

9. *Devarim be-Go*, p. 402.

10. The 'fourth or fifth century' can be found in the German version only (p. 49); the English version reads: 'they can hardly have been edited before the sixth [century]', *Major Trends*, p.45. In his *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, New York ^{2}1965 (^{1}1960), p. 8, he argues (explicitly in regard to the dating of the Hekhalot material), 'that in many respects' he 'was not radical enough', i.e. he should have dated the texts even earlier.

11. *Major Trends*, p. 43 f.

12. *Major Trends*, p. 54 f.

13. *Major Trends*, p. 72 f.

14. *Major Trends*, p. 78.

15. *Major Trends*, p. 46.

16. *Major Trends*, p. 51.

17. The Hekhalot literature paradoxically uses for the 'ascent' to the Merkavah the Hebrew verb *yarad*, which literally means 'to descend', and for the 'descent' the verb *'alah*, literally 'to ascend'. Those who 'ascend' to heaven are called *yorede merkavah*, literally, 'descenders to the Merkavah'. Cf. on this Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 47; *Jewish Gnosticism*, p. 20 n. 1. The quotation is from *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, ed. by P. Schäfer in collaboration with M. Schlüter and H. G. von Mutius, Tübingen 1981, § 81.

18. *Synopse*, § 214 f.

19. *Synopse*, § 302–304 (according to Ms. Vatican 228).

20. *Synopse*, § 623; cf. also P. Schäfer, 'Die Beschwörung des Sar ha-panim. Kritische Edition und Übersetzung', *Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge* 6, 1978, pp. 114 ff.

21. *Synopse*, § 636; cf. *FJB* 6, 1978, p. 132.

22. *Synopse*, § 634; cf. *FJB* 6, 1978, p. 130.

23. *Synopse*, § 299 (Ms. Oxford).

24. *Major Trends*, p. 49: 'This mystical ascent is always preceded by ascetic practices . . .'.

25. B.M. Lewin, *Oṣar ha-Geonim*, vol. IV/2 (*Hagiga*), part 1 (*Teshuvot*), Jerusalem 1931, p. 14.

26. This has also been observed by D.J. Halperin in his review article 'A New Edition of the Hekhalot Literature', *JAOS* 104, 1984, pp. 543–552, see especially pp. 549 ff.
27. *Synopse*, § 417–419.
28. See also *Synopse*, § 204 f.
29. *Synopse*, § 248.
30. *Synopse*, § 251.
31. *Synopse*, § 411 f.
32. According to Ms. New York; the text is very difficult here.
33. On the epithets, see also *Synopse*, § 249.
34. *Synopse*, § 2; translation according to P. Alexander, '3 (Hebrew Apocalypse of) Enoch. A New Translation and Introduction', in: *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. I: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments, ed. by J. H. Charlesworth, London 1983, p. 256 f.
35. *Synopse*, § 163 f.
36. Translation according to Ms. New York.
37. Translation according to Mss. Munich 22, Vatican and Budapest.
38. *Synopse*, § 172.
39. Literally 'descend'.
40. Literally 'ascend'.
41. *Synopse*, § 218.
42. *Synopse*, § 64 f.
43. But vaguer and more formalized references are to be found also in *Synopse*, § 81. See also the texts in § 130 ff.; however, it is questionable whether these belong to *Hekhalot Rabbati*.
44. *Major Trends*, p. 72. A major concern of Scholem seems to be to point to 'apocalyptic' motifs as a substratum of a common Jewish mysticism, and as the criterion for determining what is 'mystical'. Cf. also the title of the book by I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, Leiden/Cologne, 1980.
45. *Synopse*, § 286; see also § 102 (*Hekhalot Rabbati*).
46. *Synopse*, § 164 (according to Ms. Vatican).
47. This line is only found in Mss. Vatican and Munich 22.
48. This applies mainly to the book by I. Gruenwald.
49. This has been emphasized also by Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 46.
50. Devarim Rabba 8,6; Fragment Targum Dt 30,12; Codex Neofiti, ibid.; Bavli Temura 16a.
51. *Synopse*, § 289 ff. The text is very difficult and this translation is only one of several possibilities.
52. Cf. Jer 46:21.
53. The translation follows Mss. Munich 40 and Dropsie.
54. *Synopse*, § 83–86.
55. The strange Hebrew phrase *gedullah mi-kulam* can be translated either by 'the greatest thing of all things (achievements) is . . .' or by 'one greatness (of his many) is . . .'.
56. Translation according to Ms. Budapest.
57. *Synopse*, § 341.
58. *Synopse*, §§ 341, 426, 489, 495, 500.
59. *Synopse*, § 335.
60. Literally 'fix', 'establish'.
61. *Synopse*, § 299 f.
62. *Synopse*, § 419.
63. T.-S. K 21.95.C, fol. 2a/26 = *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, ed. by P. Schäfer, Tübingen 1984, p. 103.
64. Cf. the adjuration in the Qedushah hymns of the fragment T.-S. K 21.95.S, *Geniza-Fragmente*, p. 9 ff. There (p. 11) I presumed that an adjuration speaks against a liturgical usage of the text. I would no longer maintain that it necessarily does so.
65. *Paradise Lost*, III.

The endowment of the annual Sacks Lectures at the Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies was a gift from the friends of Dr Samuel Sacks and the late Dr Elsie Sacks in honour of their fiftieth wedding anniversary.

Peter Schäfer is Professor of Jewish Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin.