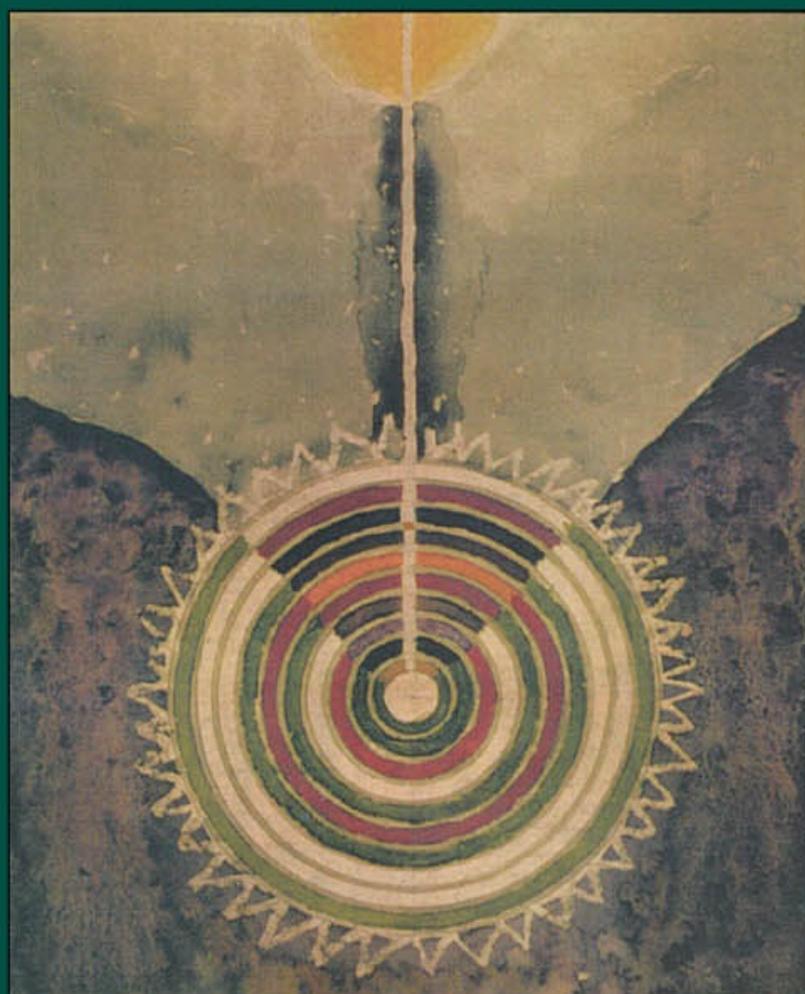


VOLUME I

# JEWISH MYSTICISM

LATE ANTIQUITY



JOSEPH DAN

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JEWISH  
MYSTICISM

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Most of the sixty studies collected in these volumes were published in scholarly journals and other scientific publications; a few are presented here for the first time. It is my pleasant duty to thank the scores of editors and publishers who contributed in various ways to the present form of these studies. They all took part in giving the articles their final internal and external shape. Almost all of these studies are based on lectures given in American and European universities in the last thirty years, and I have benefitted from the remarks of colleagues and students who participated in the discussions.

Joseph Dan  
Cambridge, Mass.

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# Jewish Mysticism in Late Antiquity: Introduction

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One of the most significant characteristics of the texts that represent the earliest mystical phenomenon in Jewish religiosity is the complete absence of historical information in the two dozen treatises that comprise the *Hechalot* and *Merkavah* literature. It is impossible, in the present state of scholarly research, to establish with any confidence the chronological sequence or the historical circumstances in which these treatises were written. This Introduction and the following studies seek to present the key problems concerning the definition and the central subjects of the texts related to the early beginnings of Jewish mysticism in Late Antiquity, which had meaningful impact on its later development in the High Middle Ages and in modern times.

## **“BEGINNING” IN HISTORY: FROM DETERMINISM TO CHAOS**

The concept of “beginning,” concerning historical phenomena, is one that is both untenable and unavoidable. Any statement pointing to the “beginning” of any process, cycle, or epoch easily can be challenged by the presentation of some precedents that are found in previous periods. History does not recognize any absolute beginnings or any absolute endings; the dynamics of historical development always include a combination of the old and the new, constantly changing yet still retaining some of their old characteristics. The careful historian who wishes to preserve his writing beyond any possibility of contradiction had better avoid the term completely.

Without the concept of “beginning,” on the other hand, there is no history, because beginnings represent change, and historical development is the expression of change. Without multiple new beginnings in every phase and every realm, history is static. The intellectual world in the twentieth century was deeply influenced by ideologies and

narratives that denied “beginning” and postulated the eternal repetition of fixed phenomena, reducing history to superficial variations expressing unchanging principles. In the realm of the study of religion, the most popular conceptions of this kind were those presented by Carl Gustav Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell. In different ways, all three denied historical development in the fields of religion, philosophy, and art; there are fixed archetypes that repeat themselves in superficially changing guises in all human cultures, in every period. Jung saw these archetypes as essentially psychological, springing from the collective unconscious common to all human beings; Eliade believed that he identified a fixed set of cultural symbols that repeat themselves in all rituals and spiritual expressions; and Campbell viewed everything as the unfolding and re-unfolding of the same basic mythical narrative. The work of the scholar, according to these writers and the various schools that sprang up in their wake, is to identify the underlying similarity beyond the apparent diversity, and to reduce them to their eternal principles, which remain forever unchanged. In such a structure, “beginning” has no meaning; everything was always there, noticed or unnoticed.

The denial of history requires the erasure of individual human creativity. If there is nothing new, the human spirit can never innovate. History is the story of individuals having an impact and changing their surroundings—materially, culturally, and spiritually. If what seems to be an individual creative contribution is nothing but the reappearance of fixed, universal principles, the individual is just the instrument of eternity, having nothing to contribute of his own making. In Jung’s system, there is not even a place for divine intervention; the religious symbols existed eternally, independent of historical events. Thus, the sanctity of the cross in Christianity is not the result of a particular historical event in Jerusalem, but one more unfolding of the eternal symbol, which existed before that event. In this way, the “beginning” of Christianity is denied, because historical change and individual creativity and sacrifice lose all meaning.

The most dangerous aspect of these and similar systems is that their formulators and adherents substitute their own set of preconceptions and prejudices for historical study. When Jung, Campbell, and Eliade approach a text, they do not seek its intrinsic meaning; they know, before reading it, what it should contain, and then proceed to “prove” and “demonstrate” that their personal narratives are indeed inherent within the text. They thus impose their own, individual innovations on all existing cultural phenomena; instead of studying history, they look into a mirror, admiring their own “eternal” features.

These approaches, so characteristic of the twentieth century, are closely related to the dominance of deterministic ideologies throughout this period, which, even though they pretended to reflect “historical truth,” actually imposed their own preconceived narratives on all historical and cultural phenomena. The most important ones were, of course, the Marxist and the fascist schools, which presented concepts of predestination, imposing a fixed structure of history that human will cannot change. These are the great metanarratives of this century that stifled and disfigured historical investigation for several generations. It is no wonder that the formulators of systems like Jung’s and

Eliade's had close contacts with the fascist and Nazi narratives; the myths they created—and believed are reflected throughout human culture—had common ground with the denial of individuality and the imposition of nationalistic and racial mythologies. Marxism denied spiritual and religious creativity as independent phenomena, and viewed them as “superstructures” decided by economic objective, impersonal laws that imposed ideas and cultures on the societies in which they were operating. Marxist history is deterministic, moving in a fixed direction that cannot be changed, and beliefs, artistic expressions, and rituals inevitably follow them.

The revival of the appreciation of individual creativity in the wake of the crumbling of these metanarratives gives hope that a revival of historical study in the proper sense, as a record of human endeavors, failures, mistakes, and shortcomings—as well as its brilliant innovations and great insights—is now possible. Freed from the shackles of deterministic pseudohistorical narratives, the concept of a beginning can be reinstated as a recognition of the human spirit's unique breakthroughs and its struggle for greater achievements. This process, in the last decades, was united with the destruction of the Enlightenment structures that imposed the belief in a constant human progress and improvement. In this sense, the Enlightenment imposed the greatest metanarrative of all: that of progress, which, despite its “liberalism” and “freedom,” actually predetermined the “direction” of history. The belief in inevitable progress toward greater freedom, increased understanding, wider horizons, and the “victory” of human knowledge and wisdom (sometimes with religious overtones of increasing spiritual perfection and proximity to God) characterized these narratives. All of these narratives, however, were brutally and totally destroyed by the events of this century, which proved that the increase in knowledge, the flourishing of art, the devotion to music, the thriving of universities, the sophistication of state services, and others could not prevent the emergence of human cruelty and the imposition of misery in dimensions never known before in more “primitive” human societies.

History is destined to be charted—to use a concept that has been very productive in understanding many physical phenomena—as a chaotic system. Contemporary chaos theory postulates the existence of systems that include only one unavoidable principle: Exact repetition is impossible. A system may include cycles and similarities, but never an exact reappearance of a previous state. In this sense, it is an appropriate framework for the postnarrative study of history: the attempt to understand historical expressions in their own context, by their own rules, assuming that in their basis is the unique manifestation of individual creativity. In such a context, the concept of “beginning” can be accurately described as the analytical introduction of the concept of newness into an ever-flowing and ever-changing multitude of phenomena. It is a yardstick suggested by a historian, presenting his considerations and reasons, which may be criticized by his fellow-historians and changed as conceptions change. At best, it may be the result of an exhaustive study of the relevant material; but even then, the inclusion of new data and new observations may demand a change.

In the following pages, my reasons and observations concerning the beginning of Jewish mysticism in Late Antiquity are presented. They are suggestions based on my studies of the relevant data, greatly assisted by the work of teachers and colleagues. At

best, they are a reflection of the current state of the study of the subject today, undoubtedly requiring revisions and changes in the future, as research develops and more data are acquired. One provision, however, should be stated: The conclusions presented here are open to criticism and improvement based on textual analysis. It is hoped, however—despite many indications to the contrary—that the age of imposed narratives has passed, and that debate will be based on the ongoing, persistent attempt to deduce the meaning of historical phenomena, rather than integrating these phenomena in a preconceived structure, based on faith.

## MYSTICISM AND JEWISH MYSTICISM

Any discussion of the subject of this collection of essays is dependent upon a definition, or at least some understanding, of what one means by the term “mysticism.” This subject, however, belongs to the last volume in this series, in which the Introduction and several of the chapters are dedicated to the analysis of the meaning of “mysticism” in general and in a Jewish context in particular. Suffice it to say that mysticism, as used in these volumes, is conceived as a religious phenomenon that posits its adherents in a separate, and often conflicting, state compared to their co-religionists; that is, mysticism belongs to the wide range of religious expressions, but it is manifestly and essentially different from the concept of religion held by the majority and the establishment of any particular period or culture. Mysticism is most clearly designated by its negative statements: the denial of the veracity of sensual perception, the rejection of logic as a means of achieving truth, and—most importantly—the negation of communicative language as an instrument for the expression of divine truth. Instead, the mystics use a kind of negative language (sometimes called “apophatic”) that, at best, remotely denotes some vague aspects of the hidden truth but can never express it in any precise manner. Because of this attitude, the mystics of scriptural religions deny scriptural interpretation as practiced by their co-religionists and uphold the existence of a mystical meaning to the ancient divine revelation in language, one that cannot be transcribed to communicative language.

These and others are negative descriptions of mysticism (which in itself is a negative designation; mysticism is what we do not know, not something we know); the positive ones, inasmuch as they can be described, are contingent, that is, dependent upon the characteristics of a particular culture, religion, ritual, and social and historical circumstances. There cannot be any definite generalization concerning the positive statements of the mystics, because the mystics deny making them; their pronouncements are approximations and vague hints at truths that are beyond human expression, and therefore cannot be summarized, analyzed, and compared to each other by historians.

The concept of mysticism developed within Christian culture, and it has an authentic meaning within its framework. In Judaism and Islam, however, such a concept was not developed, and there is no term or designation for such a phenomenon in these religious cultures. Scholars have found in the Jewish kabbalah and in the Islamic Sufism elements that are analogical to Christian mysticism, and when we speak

about mysticism in these cultures we are using that analogy. It is wrong to suppose that kabbalah is mysticism or that Sufism is mysticism; these vast literatures contain many subjects, one of which may be characterized analogically as mysticism. It should be remembered that the term “Jewish mysticism” denotes not an authentic intrinsic concept within Jewish religious culture, but the imposition of a Christian concept upon Jewish phenomena in an analogical way.

Assuming for the moment (pending the detailed discussion in Volume IV) that we know what this concept of mysticism implies, how do we approach the question of identifying Jewish mysticism and applying the complex historical concept of “beginning” to it? Three possibilities present themselves: one, to try to decide who was the first Jew to contemplate the mystical realm and have mystical experiences, and when it happened. Second, to ask where in our literature we find the earliest traces of a mystical attitude. And third: What is the first manifestation of a mystical group, movement, or circle within the history of Jewish culture?

The first formulation is psychological rather than historical. It postulates that we can know what a person intended or experienced in his soul. As the mystics claim that mystical truth is beyond communication, a historian must declare the realm of the actual content of mystical knowledge and experience as one that is beyond his reach. The historian has in his possession, at best, the words; when their value is denied as indications of what “really” happened, there is no way by which he can include it in his historical discourse as a record of an event. Did Ezekiel have a mystical experience on the River Kevar? Did Elijah—or Enoch—achieve mystical union with God, and was thereby uplifted to the divine realm? These questions are beyond the scope of historical investigation, and outside the realm of scholarly and scientific study. Any statement concerning them falls into the category of things that cannot be disproved, and therefore they are not scholarly statements (following Carl Popper’s definition of a scientific statement as one that can be disproved, and that is valid as long as it has not been disproved). In every case with which I am familiar that includes a statement of this kind, it is obvious that the writer believes that he knows what *should* happen in a mystical event, and interprets the verses to conform to his own personal preconception, which may be derived from other sources, or from personal experience, or from both.

The second possibility is that of literary analysis: Which are the earliest texts that we can categorize as mystical? One may take verses from the Psalms, or some visions included in the books of prophecy, and decide that they indicate the existence of a mystical experience. The flaw in this method is that it represents, in fact, an exercise in the implementation of a definition. Such analysis does not listen to the text and its context; it has a preconceived definition of the characteristics of mysticism (i.e., intense supernatural phenomena, colorful visions, expressions of unbounded love for God), and in this way “mysticism” is used to label the text. It is impossible to deny that mystical attitudes may be incorporated in the Jewish religious texts of antiquity; it is doubtful, however, whether there is a single text in this vast literature for which the term “religious” is insufficient. Prophetic literature, for instance, is an expression of a strong belief in the ability of language to present divine truth: God is revealed to the prophet and gives him a message, which he delivers faithfully to the people. If they do not heed

it, this is because they are sinners, and not because language is not a proper means of communicating divine messages. There is hardly a passage in this literature for which terms like “metaphor” are insufficient, and “apophatic language” is required to explain them. A literary analysis of ancient religious texts in order to discover a hidden, mystical underlying meaning is not a promising historical enterprise.

The third possibility, the one adopted in this study, is the quest for a mystical phenomenon that is characterized by historical manifestations: a group of people separated from their co-religionists and establishing a particular group or groups, extending for several generations; the creation of a unique literature, different in its genres and modes of expression from contemporary culture; development of a terminology that is recognizable as characteristic of this group; and the appearance of references to a kind of activity that is not to be found in previous texts. Such considerations, I believe, led Gershom Scholem to position the chapter on *Hechalot* and *Merkavah* mysticism as the opening chapter of a historical sequence of studies, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, delivered as lectures in 1938 and published as a book in 1941. Scholem’s attitude changed, however, twenty years later, when he published his monograph on these mystics, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition*. From a historical point of view, it seems that the Scholem of 1941 was more methodologically careful and textually correct than the Scholem of 1960. The main difference between the two versions is found in their attitude toward the relationship between talmudic and midrashic literature on the one hand and the mystical treatises on the other.

## THE TALMUDIC ESTABLISHMENT AND THE *HECHALOT* FRINGE

Traditional discussions of the beginnings of Jewish mysticism usually begin with the presentation and analysis of certain talmudic passages, especially those collected in the beginning of the second chapter of the tractate *Hagiga* in the Mishnah, the Tosefta, and the Jerusalemite and Babylonian Talmuds. Indeed, in these few pages there is an impressive collection of rabbinic discussions of the nature of the world, the process of creation, the structure of heaven and earth, the sequence of firmaments and the figures of archangels, and some opaque passages indicating an awareness of the divine realm itself. These pages are characterized by a deep sense of traditionality, coupled by an intense esoteric way of presentation. No new discovery is presented, with the probable exceptions of the entrance of Rabbi Akiva to the *pardes* and the speculations of Ben Zoma; the whole corpus is described as a continuation of the ancient homiletical and exegetical presentations of the first chapters of the book of Genesis, that is, the “work of genesis” (*maaseh bereshit*), and of the first chapter of Ezekiel, the “work of the chariot” (*maaseh Merkavah*). The rabbis expound these biblical sections in the same way that talmudic-midrashic literature expounds all portions of the Bible; these discussions are different, however, in that they are presented as esoteric ones, forbidden to be presented to the public and dangerous to all who indulge in them. Thus we find here a description of a sermon that Rabbi Eleazar ben Arackh delivered in front of his

teacher, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, without even one word of the contents of the sermon being quoted; we find here a parable, the “four who entered the *pardes*,” without its meaning being explained. In these cases, unlike most sections of the vast talmudic-midrashic complex, the narrative framework is given while the actual content is hidden. The starting point of these pages—the Mishnah section on which they depend—is one prohibiting the homiletical study of these biblical portions, at least in public. Several statements in these collections clearly denote the terrible fate awaiting anyone who carelessly indulges in these subjects, like the child who contemplated the word *hashmal* in Ezekiel’s description of the chariot, who was engulfed by a fire that came out of the *hashmal*.

These and similar sections in talmudic-midrashic literature clearly denote the existence in Judaism of Late Antiquity of a rich, detailed tradition concerning cosmogony and cosmology, magic and angelology, that was regarded as extremely esoteric and often very dangerous. This tradition included speculation concerning the nature and structure of the divine realms, mostly in the form of homiletical exegesis, and sometimes formulated in hymns and prayers. The question is whether this tradition can properly be described as “mystical.” Concerning this tradition, it appears to be impossible to apply the term “beginning” with any accuracy; it seems to be deeply rooted in the biblical texts, and to have developed consistently throughout the period of the Second Temple and the period after its destruction. A multitude of references to such subjects in the apocryphal, pseudepigraphical and apocalyptic literature of this period, especially the old treatises connected with the figure of Enoch son of Yared, attest to the persistence of many motifs in this tradition. Parallel texts abound also in the Dead Sea scrolls and in early Christian literature, and some are found also in Jewish works written in Greek, like those of Philo of Alexandria, and in early gnostic literature. If the whole complex of esoteric-speculative and magical traditions of this sort, which is the *maaseh Merkavah* tradition, is to be regarded as a manifestation of Jewish mysticism, then indeed the application of the term “beginning” and a historical approach to the study of the subject are very difficult, if not actually impossible.

The application of strict historical criteria to this subject reveals a completely different picture. The *maaseh Merkavah* traditions constitute an integrated, inseparable part of rabbinic culture (and of other, parallel and competing, Jewish cultures of that period). Mystics tend to separate themselves from such cultures and traditions, and position themselves at its margins. If this is the phenomenon we seek, it becomes very clear indeed that such an event did occur in the second or third century, and a well-defined, distinctive group of spiritualists separated from the body of rabbinic culture and created its own matrix of activities, literary creativity, terminology, and spiritual endeavors. This group constitutes the *yordey ha-Merkavah*, the “descenders to the chariot,” the earliest Jewish mystics, and their circle can be regarded as the beginning of the mystical phenomenon without monotheistic, or scriptural, religions.

## **YORDEY HA-MERKAVAH**

“*Yordey ha-Merkavah*” is a designation that the early Jewish mystics chose for themselves; later the term was used by others to describe them. Though many suggestions were made, it is still unclear why the ascension to the divine realms should be described by those who participate in it as a descent, but it certainly enhances the separation and uniqueness of this group. This term is not found anywhere in talmudic-midrashic literature. Other central and characteristic terms used by them are also unique. Three of the main treatises produced by these mystics are titled *Sefer Hechalot*, *Hechalot Rabbati*, and *Hechalot Zutarti* (the *Book of Hechalot*, the *Great Book of Hechalot*, and the *Small Book of Hechalot*). According to their concept of the celestial realms, there are seven heavens (this view is shared by talmudic cosmology), above which there is a succession of seven *hechalot* (“palaces” or “temples”) into which the mystic ascends, until he reaches the seventh, in which God Himself resides. The centrality of this term, and the images connected with it, are evident in every paragraph of this literature. Yet the term *hechalot* (in the plural, designating a sequence of structures in the celestial realms) is not found anywhere in the vast talmudic-midrashic literature, and it is completely absent from the other esoteric treatises that are usually called *Hechalot* and *Merkavah* literature, which deal with magic, cosmology, cosmogony, and the interpretation of Ezekiel’s chariot. The main term that these mystics use to designate the image of God, *shiur komah*, “the measure of the height,” has not been found anywhere outside of the small body of treatises of the *yordey ha-Merkavah*. There can be no doubt that when studying this circle we are faced with a new phenomenon, distinct and separate not only from the talmudic-midrashic literature, but also from the Apocrypha, the Dead Sea scrolls, Jewish-Hellenistic literature, gnostic literature, and Christian literature, and distinct even from the score or so other esoteric treatises of this period.

The uniqueness of this group is evident not only by their terminology, but even more so by the very nature of their worldview and the way it is expressed. The “descent to the chariot,” which is described in detail several times in these treatises, is an active quest of the mystic, culminating in the mystic’s gradual ascent from stage to stage in the divine realm, overcoming dangers, withstanding tests, and using various methods, a spiritual journey that reaches a summit when the mystic is facing the beauty of God sitting on His throne in the seventh *hechal*. From the descriptions, it is evident that the process was regarded—at least at one part of the period in which this practice flourished—as a spiritual one, during which the body of the mystic remains unconscious in the synagogue or *bet midrash* where the mystics assemble, while his soul ascends to the divine spheres. There is no parallel to such an activity in rabbinic literature, or indeed in any of the Jewish sources we have from this period. Yet this practice is not only different from rabbinic modes or religious worship; it is also contradictory and even rebellious toward the most basic cultural-religious norms of the age.

During the Second Temple period, Judaism experienced a most meaningful transformation from a religion based on constant divine revelation to one that derives its authority from scriptural exegesis and tradition. The biblical period is characterized

by the succession of divine revelations, whenever this is required, to the judges, to the kings, to the prophets. God intervened in history and directed it by making His will known to selected people in every generation. Early in the history of the Second Temple an “end to prophecy” is recognized. From now on, the will of God is to be discerned from the texts of the old revelations. God has ceased the sequence of revelations, and His eternal directions have been transmitted by the oral traditions passed from one generation of leaders to the other, and by the ever-renewed interpretation of the sacred texts. The new phenomenon of a scriptural religion has thus been established. As the exegesis of scriptures developed, suspicion and antagonism were gradually directed toward any expression of direct divine revelation. Such a revelation may be construed as competing, or even denying, the normal process of the discovery of the will of God in scriptures. The Midrash thus became more central and more important for the religious present than direct divine intervention. Rabbinic Judaism of Late Antiquity became an intensely text-oriented religious culture.

Not everybody accepted this development wholeheartedly. The pseudepigraphic literature is an expression of a demand for direct divine revelation and the presentation of new, relevant word of God in the changing historical circumstances. Yet even the authors of this literature did not dare to claim that they had an experience of a meeting with God; they substituted such a claim by the pseudepigraphic device: They presented the “discovery” of ancient texts of divine revelations that were made to Enoch, Abraham, Moses, Solomon, Isaiah, and Ezra. Pseudepigraphy serves thus as a compromise between direct, first-hand experience of God and the study of the old text: the presentation of new texts that pretend to be ancient. Christianity may also be regarded as a rebellion against the authority of the text and the Midrash: It presented a direct divine revelation (though the veracity of this revelation was supported by exegesis of the old texts of the prophets).

The *Hechalot* mystics represented such a rebellion, unprecedented in its radical nature in rabbinic Judaism. These mystics claimed to have discovered a way by which great sages can envision God directly and experience the rituals of heaven. They even composed manuals that directed a person how to achieve this, describing them as “a ladder in a person’s house,” ready to be used when needed. They did not utilize the midrashic methods in order to glean truth from the ancient texts; instead they claimed that, by using their methodologies, a person may be elevated to the highest realms and that divine truth will be revealed to him in an immediate, colorful, and exhilarating experience. In this they were more radical than the Christians, who did not (in this period) compose manuals including instructions for coming into a direct personal experience of God. This is an extreme denial of the most important norms of rabbinic Judaism, a negation of the Midrash, and an insistence that a better way for the knowledge of God has been revealed to them. In one of the chapters in this collection (“The Revelation of the Secret of the World”), I put forward the suggestion that these mystics were conscious of the new beginning that they represented, and that they were aware that their way is one that had not been known to previous generations.

This departure, I believe, represents the beginning of Jewish mysticism, and the title “beginning” is appropriate despite the fact that the treatises composed in this circle

continue, in a way, the old traditions of *maaseh Merkavah*. The old traditions served as a framework from which the new, radical mystical attitude emerged and took shape. While the esoteric discourse of *maaseh Merkavah* was integrated with rabbinic traditions, the active mystical ascent of the *Hechalot* mystics was not, and produced the first example of a group of spiritualists who created their own separate complex of religious-mystical experiences in ways unaccepted by their co-religionists.

This development did not result in any apparent schism or conflict, probably because the mystics did not deviate concerning the most essential norms of their society, those relating to the fulfillment of the commandments. The fact that they selected the figures of the two main builders of the rabbinic culture—Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael, the pillars of the traditions of the Mishnah—as the prototypes of mystical achievers denotes that they viewed themselves as part of the rabbinic tradition and culture. Rabbinic displeasure concerning their different attitude was expressed in the same way as toward other dissenting groups and trends: the omission of any mention of their existence from talmudic-midrashic literature. We have in the canonized texts of the two Talmuds and the classical Midrashim only a handful of references to the most cataclysmic events in the history of the mishnaic period: the Bar Kochba rebellion is mentioned; the early Christians are hardly mentioned; there is no reference to the Kumeran sects and the world revealed by the Dead Sea scrolls; the trends reflected in the Apocrypha are hardly found in the Talmud, and Enoch, the central figure in an important body of religious literature, has been completely marginalized; the terminology and cosmology of the *Sefer Yezira*—the *Book of Creation*—written probably in the third century, is not found in the talmudic-midrashic volumes. *Hechalot* active mysticism represents one more example of dissenting religious phenomena that have been excluded from rabbinic compilations of normative texts. Only a very small number of statements in the Talmud, especially those connected with Rabbi Akiva, may refer to *Hechalot* practices. Among these, the two most important ones are the parable of the “four who entered the *pardes*,” and a strange statement quoted from Rabbi Akiva in the Babylonian Talmud (*Hagigah* 15b): “When you approach [a place of] stones of pure marble, do not say ‘Water, water’ ”; another concerns Rabbi Ishmael—his entrance to the Holy of Holies and his discourse with Achatriel (*Berachot* 7a).

Rabbi Akiva’s statement concerning “water, water” served as the main argument presented by Gershom Scholem in his *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* in presenting *Hechalot* mysticism as the underlying, esoteric, mystical world-view of the rabbinic world as a whole. In its talmudic context, this sentence is completely incomprehensible. Many attempts were made to explain it allegorically, but none of them seems to be satisfactory. The only context in which this statement makes some kind of sense is that of the description of the tests that the *yordey ha-Merkavah* undergo at the gate of the sixth palace, as described in both *Hechalot Rabbati* and *Hechalot Zutarti*. The guardian of this gate, according to the mystical texts, confronts those who venture to ascend to the innermost divine realm with a series of arbitrary tests, one of which is the presentation of a floor of pure

marble stones that shine as if they were the waves of the sea; he who makes the mistake and draws away, saying “Water, water,” is immediately executed in a brutal, cruel way. Rabbi Akiva’s warning to his disciples is perfectly understandable if one assumes that the talmudic text was aware of the whole process of mystical ascensions and the dangers they present. This was Scholem’s conclusion: From this and a few similar references he surmised that many talmudic and midrashic statements cannot be understood unless one assumes that the content of the *Hechalot* treatises was an integral part of the worldview of the rabbinic-midrashic cultural world. The great talmudic scholar Saul Lieberman supported Scholem’s conclusion and added further arguments to illustrate it. Both scholars therefore postulated that the mystical concepts of the *Hechalot* treatises predate the tanaitic texts that refer to these subjects. Scholem’s analysis did not distinguish between *Hechalot* mysticism and the *maaseh Merkavah* traditions, so that he had plenty of material that indicated the integration of the “mystical” elements—including cosmogony, cosmology, magic, and homiletical interpretations of Ezekiel’s chariot—within rabbinic culture. He postulated, therefore, that talmudic-midrashic literature included within it, in an esoteric manner, the concept of the active ascension to the chariot, and therefore mysticism was a constituent aspect of rabbinic culture in general. Lieberman went even further, declaring that the concept of God as described in the *Shiur Komah* treatise is identical to *Maaseh Merkavah*, as well as to the rabbinic Midrash of the Song of Songs.

When Scholem’s monograph was written, there was an expectation of great new discoveries that might shed new light on the history of Jewish mysticism. At that time, the Nag Hammadi gnostic library (discovered in Egypt in 1946) was being prepared for publication, the Dead Sea scrolls were being studied, and it seemed that new material was constantly supplying new evidence concerning the history and character of ancient spiritual movements and phenomena. In such an atmosphere it was natural for a scholar to ignore negative evidence and to dare to present theses that, if not completely substantiated today, undoubtedly would be proved by future discoveries and analyses.

The last few decades mark a significant disappointment that created a new atmosphere in the study of Judaism in Late Antiquity. The study of the gnostic library of Nag Hammadi emphasized the differences between Judaism and gnosticism rather than revealing the interrelationship binding them together. The Dead Sea scrolls, after all the texts were published, failed to shed new light on the history of Jewish mysticism. Some new texts from Kumeran include material that is connected with the traditions of *maaseh Merkavah*, especially the hymns to the Sabbath, but none had any implication concerning the origins and development of the *yordey ha-Merkavah* mysticism. The notion that mystical activity had a place in Judaism before the late tanaitic period has not been supported by any new textual evidence. Despite an insistent scholarly effort, the study of talmudic-midrashic literature did not yield any proof that the terminology and practices of the early Jewish mystics were integrated constituents of their spiritual world.

This process coincided with another meaningful phenomenon in Jewish studies: the eruption of interest and scholarly activity in the field of *Hechalot* and *Merkavah*

literature. Since the publication of Scholem's monograph, but especially since 1980, this field has become perhaps the most vibrant and creative one in Jewish studies. The century and a half before 1980 produced three volume-length studies of the subject. Since then, almost every year has witnessed the publication of two or three volumes dedicated to the study of the ancient esoteric texts. Hundreds of articles have been published, and a score or more scholars in Israel, Europe, and the United States have dedicated their best scholarly efforts to these texts. It is now one of the few subjects in postbiblical Jewish studies that has become a truly international topic of study, in which Jewish and non-Jewish scholars work together in complete harmony. One of the direct results of such intense scholarly activity is that, unlike the situation 1960, one can—and should—take into account negative results as well as positive ones. The most important negative result is that the integration between *Hechalot* mystical activity and terminology and talmudic-midrashic culture has not been proved; rather, the distance between them seems to be growing as detailed analysis of the texts progresses.

Ephrayim E. Urbach, the great talmudic scholar, pointed this out in 1966, in a study of the esoteric traditions of the tannaitic period that was actually a critical review of the Scholem-Lieberman thesis. He was followed by others—among them David Halperin, Peter Schaefer, Philip Alexander, and me. Others, however, still uphold the old notions, claiming that there was an esoteric oral tradition that surfaced in the *Hechalot* treatises, but that its origins are ancient; some hold that it has its origins in the biblical period. This is not a scholarly statement, because it can never be disproved (using the excellent definition of scholarship suggested by Carl Popper): One can never prove that there was no oral tradition, and one is free to ascribe to it any content one wishes. The statement (or absence of one) that there was no oral tradition of this kind carries as much weight as the one that states that there was an oral tradition. Postulating a secret mystical tradition is as valid as postulating an antimystical secret tradition—an Aristotelian rationalistic one, for instance. “Secret traditions” and their contents are a matter of faith, not of historical scholarship, and while faith should not be derided, especially in the study of religion, it should not be confused with scholarship. A historian is obligated to present the facts and possibilities as indicated by the existing material, knowing that future discoveries and analyses may prove him wrong. The best he can do is to aspire to exhaust existing material, taking into account negative testimony as well as positive testimony; when the textual picture changes, the conclusions will change with it.

A similar process can be discerned concerning the relationship between *Hechalot* mysticism and gnosticism, the powerful and dynamic spiritual phenomenon that produced several sects and groups that flourished in *Eretz Yisrael* and the surrounding countries, especially in the second and third centuries. The same methodological approach should be applied to the study of this subject. Since the beginning of scholarly work concerning ancient Jewish mysticism, the term “gnosticism” has been central in the discourse of this subject. The titles of the books dedicated to it by Heinrich Graetz in 1846 and Gershom Scholem in 1960 include this term. Many of the scholars involved in the study of this field intuitively felt that there must be a connection between the