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INTRODUCTION TO *THE BOOK OF CONTEMPLATION*, *THE FOUNTAIN OF WISDOM*, AND *THE BOOK OF UNITY*

In western Europe, around the year 1230,¹ an obscure Jewish luminary writing under the nom de plume, Rabbi Hammai, composed a short yet profound theosophical treatise, probing the recondite nature of the Divine realm. *Hammai*, it should be noted, is an Aramaic epithet signifying “seer” or “visionary.”² He entitled his trenchant essay *Sefer ha-Iyyun*, *The Book of Contemplation* (hereafter, *Contemplation*). As it circulated throughout Spain and Provence it influenced other Jewish mystics. Within a few decades, dozens of texts were composed reflecting the idiosyncratic doctrines and terminology of *Contemplation*. Accordingly, it has become scholarly convention to refer to all of these works under the rubric of the writings of the “Circle of Contemplation” (hereafter “Circle”).³

Contemplation is undoubtedly one of the seminal texts of the Jewish mystical tradition. Not only did it have a marked impact on contemporaneous works, but it continued to be studied and cited in

1. On the contentious issue of dating, see below pp. 179-185.

2. The Aramaic *hamma'/hammy* connotes seeing or observing. Thanks are due to Marc Brettler for this insight. Moreover, as Bernard Septimus has suggested, the rabbinic ending 'alef, yud would signify one who engages in visionary or contemplative activity.

3. This construct was first formulated by Scholem and stems from the earliest period of his career, “Zur Frage der Entstehung der Kabbala,” *Korrespondenzblatt des Vereins zur Grundung und Erhaltung einer Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, 9 (1928), 18-21. Subsequently, he mapped out the boundaries of the “Circle” by compiling a bibliographical catalogue of thirty-two distinct texts, *Reshit ha-Kabbalah* (Jerusalem 1948) 255-262. His most extensive discussion of these writings is found in *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton 1987), 309-364.

subsequent centuries.⁴ This in itself would justify serious research, and it was for this reason that I began my investigation of this text a number of years ago. What started out as a straightforward project became something much more fascinating with the startling discovery that there were in fact a whole series of interrelated texts, preserved only in manuscripts, bearing the name *Contemplation* and attributed to the mysterious Rabbi Hammai. Moreover, the only version of this work that was generally known and cited by scholars, such as Gershom Scholem, proved to be the last in the series, and therefore the farthest removed from the original composition and its doctrines.

During the thirteenth century the different recensions of *Contemplation* were readily accessible, as is evidenced by contemporary citations. After that time only the last version remained in the public domain—the others became sequestered in unstudied manuscripts. A comparative analysis reveals that the various recensions underwent substantive changes. As we shall eventually see, the theological doctrines of the earliest version differ radically from the last. Presumably, this is indicative of a succession of authors that felt compelled to revise and reformulate the book's original teachings.

Insofar as there is more than one text bearing the name *The Book of Contemplation*, it is appropriate to refer to these works collectively as *The Books of Contemplation*. The bulk of this monograph will be devoted to a presentation and analysis of these texts. We shall offer critical editions of the surviving Hebrew manuscripts, basing our results on some fifty different witnesses, currently preserved in libraries throughout the world. In addition, these treatises will be

4. Throughout this study numerous references will be made to the connections between *Contemplation* and other Spanish mystical writings from the early thirteenth century. Its influence on somewhat later authors is discernible in the late thirteenth-century German theologian R. Moses b. Eliezer ha-Darshan and the following late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century figures: R. David b. Abraham ha-Lavan, R. Isaac of Acco, R. Menahem Recanati, and R. Joseph of Hamadan. In the subsequent centuries many of the pivotal kabbalists likewise referred to this text, including: R. Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov, R. Meir ibn Gabbai, R. Moses Cordovero, and R. Hayyim Vital.

Nor was interest in *Contemplation* confined to Jewish authors. Beginning with Johannes Reuchlin, who cites *Contemplation* a number of times in his *De Arte Cabbalistica*, other Christian Renaissance theosophists followed suit, including Agrippa and Kircher. For bibliographical references to these and other sources, cf. M. Verman, *Sifrei ha-Iyyun* (Harvard U. diss. 1984), 155-163.

translated and annotated, with a focus on significant theological and philological issues.

There is a second pivotal treatise that will also be considered. It is entitled *Ma'yan ha-Hokhmah, The Fountain of Wisdom* (hereafter, *Fountain*), and is dramatically claimed by its anonymous author to represent the mystical secrets transmitted by the mysterious angel, Pe'eli, to Moses! Undeniably, it represents one of the most creative and penetrating attempts at formulating a systematic theory of cosmogony found in Judaism—second only, in the estimation of this writer, to the preeminent classical work, *Sefer Yezirah, The Book of Creation* (hereafter, *Creation*).

Like *Contemplation*, *Fountain* was composed in western Europe in the early 1200s. Together, these two books formed the cornerstones of the extensive literary corpus of the “Circle.” Each of the several dozen other texts that constitutes the “Circle” refers directly or indirectly to one and usually both of these works. What is all the more interesting is that this pattern of cross-referencing even occurs in the second and subsequent recensions of *Contemplation* itself.

Although the actual relationship between *Contemplation's* proto-version and *Fountain* is unclear and problematic, in the next chapter it will be suggested that *Fountain* was written as a critical response to proto-*Contemplation* and hence postdates it. Whatever their origins, these two distinct and markedly different treatises soon became intertwined. The corpus of writings that they inspired was vast and many faceted. As such, it represents one of the most intriguing examples of medieval Jewish theological cross-fertilization.

Among the reasons why this relationship proved so fruitful was that these writings exquisitely complement each other. *Contemplation* is concerned with theosophy and cosmology, namely how the intra-Divine and extra-Divine realms are constituted. *Fountain*, on the other hand, deals with cosmogony, i.e. how the cosmos was generated. Together they offered a potent combination of radical theology and speculative science, which profoundly influenced those mystics active in Spain in the latter half of the thirteenth century.⁵

There is a third, fragmentary text entitled *The Book of Unity*, which completes this cycle of the quintessential writings from the “Circle.” Like *Contemplation*, it too is attributed to R. Hammai. Although undeniably an outgrowth of *Contemplation*, it nonetheless

5. In rabbinic parlance these two texts would be referred to as *ma'aseh merkavah* (the account of the Chariot, i.e., Ezekiel ch. 1) and *ma'aseh bere'shit* (the account of creation, i.e., Genesis ch.1).

exhibits some of the distinctive terminology of *Fountain*. What makes this brief work truly fascinating is its focus on three supernal lights within the Godhead, said to correspond to three aspects that represent one essence. The superficial similarity between this formulation and Christian theology of the Trinity is quite apparent, yet nonetheless surprising.⁶

To be sure, the writings of the "Circle" did not appear in a vacuum. They are clearly part of the Jewish mystical tradition and exhibit identifiable literary and historical connections with earlier texts. Many of the concepts and terms that are used in these treatises stem from the classical writings of *merkavah* (chariot) theosophy, so called owing to their dependence upon Ezekiel's description of the Divine chariot. A major branch of *merkavah* mysticism is preserved in the *hekhalot* (palaces) literature—a collection of writings offering graphic descriptions of celestial domains.⁷ These texts, stemming from the rabbinic period, are variously dated from the second to eighth centuries. Not only is there evidence of the influence of these works on the "Circle," but the standard recension of the *Contemplation* even mimics *hekhalot* texts, composed nearly a millenium earlier. Moreover, in chapter 5 we shall present evidence that the writers of *The Books of Contemplation* were directly influenced by other mystical groups, including the *ḥasidei 'ashkenaz*, German pietists. The *ḥasidei 'ashkenaz* traced their esoteric tradition back many centuries, to geonic times, and were the primary preservers and transmitters of these *hekhalot* writings.

Accordingly, in order to appreciate the origins and background of the "Circle," an understanding of the basic contours of the Jewish mystical tradition is essential. What follows is a brief overview of its development. Initially, we shall focus on the symbiotic relationship between prophecy and mysticism and the reasons for their partial bifurcation. In addition, historical, sociopolitical and literary factors will be examined. The themes and issues that will be analyzed are directly pertinent to our primary concern insofar as they resurface in

6. See Scholem's comments on this issue, *Origins*, 353; for a related discussion see Y. Liebes, "Christian Influences on the Zohar" [Hebrew] *Mehkerei Yerushalayim be-Maḥshevet Yisra'el* 2:1 (1982-83), 43-74.

7. The most comprehensive edition of these texts is found in P. Schafer, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tubingen 1981); I. Gruenwald's *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (Leiden 1980) offers a systematic survey of the corpus; see also the recent study by D. Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot* (Tubingen 1988).

the Middle Ages and are clearly reflected in the writings of the "Circle."

JEWISH PROPHECY AND MYSTICISM

It is generally agreed that prophecy and mysticism represent distinct phenomena. Prophecy is dependent upon Divine communication and was situated at the core of biblical Judaism. By affirming the covenantal relationship, it sought to promote the religious and moral integrity of Israelite society. Not surprisingly, most of the pivotal figures of the Hebrew Scriptures were depicted as being prophets.

Mysticism, on the other hand, has different concerns. Definitions of mysticism abound. Gershom Scholem, in his classic study *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, favored Aquinas's formulation that mysticism entails knowledge of God through experience, *cognitio dei experimentalis*.⁸ Hence, mysticism pertains to individuals and their personal spirituality, whereas prophecy is bound up with national destiny.⁹

Biblical mysticism, however, was not isolated from prophecy. Both were predicated on Divine encounter. This interplay of prophecy and mysticism is underscored in the scriptural portrayal of Moses. On the one hand, Moses is depicted as the prophet par excellence. "There has never again arisen in Israel, a prophet like Moses" (Deut. 34:10). The Rabbis expressed this as follows: "All the prophets looked through an opaque glass, but Moses looked through a translucent glass."¹⁰ At the same time, Moses was the most sublime mystic. He encountered God "face to face"¹¹ and longed to experience God as no one ever had.¹²

8. See Scholem's discussion, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York 1972), 4.

9. See the discussion in A.J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York 1962), 2:141f.

10. *B. Yevamot*, 49b; cf. Paul's statement 1 Cor. 13:12 "For now we see in a mirror darkly, but then face to face." On Paul's concluding phrase, which is likewise related to Moses, see the next note.

11. Exod. 33:11, Num. 12:8, and Deut. 34:10.

12. Compare the discussion of Exod. 33:18 in *Fountain*, p. 57 below.

It is noteworthy that in addition to this personal, experiential component, Jewish mysticism is also characterized by an intense literary enterprise. It is not simply that the most significant testimonies of mystical activity have been preserved in writing. Rather, it is these literary expositions themselves that are the cornerstones of Jewish mysticism. Jewish mystics read and responded to the earlier writings. Presumably, these later figures had their own experiences; nevertheless, they were conditioned and influenced by the literary heritage. Accordingly, significant themes and motifs continually reappear.

This literary cross-referencing is not only apparent in later periods, it is even evident in biblical times.¹³ For example, if one were to compare the descriptions of the celestial kingdom and the enthroned Deity, as found in various passages in the Hebrew Scriptures, many common features would emerge. As these accounts are pivotal for postbiblical mysticism and offer an interesting counterpoint to works that we shall be studying, it is worthwhile to quote the essential elements of the following five biblical texts and then reflect on their interrelationships.

After the revelation at Mount Sinai, Moses and the elders ascended the mountain. "And they saw the God of Israel and there was under His feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for [its] clearness" (Exod. 24:10). A second, brief account was conveyed by the prophet Micaiah, son of Imlah. "I saw the Lord sitting on his throne and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left" (1 Kings 22:19).

Turning now to Isaiah's description of his visionary experience, which constitutes the cornerstone of the doxology in the Jewish and Christian liturgies, we read:

I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and His hem filled the temple. Above Him stood the seraphim; each had six wings. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory" (Isa. 6:1-3).

13. On the phenomenon of biblical cross-referencing, see M. Fishbane's comprehensive study *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford 1985), as well as R. Alter's insightful discussion, "Language as Theme in the Book of Judges," *The Eleventh Annual Rabbi Louis Feinberg Memorial Lecture* (University of Cincinnati 1988).

Within the mystical tradition, Ezekiel's vision plays an especially prominent role. Most of the first chapter of this book describes the Divine chariot and its four celestial creatures. It is concluded by a graphic depiction of the Lord.

Above the firmament over their [i.e. the holy creatures'] heads there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness as it were of a human form. Upward from what had the appearance of his loins I saw as it were gleaming bronze, like the appearance of fire enclosed round about. Downward from what had the appearance of his loins I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness round about him. Like the appearance of the rainbow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about (Ezek. 1:26-28).

The final account that we shall consider is the most explicit depiction of the Deity in the Hebrew Scriptures and is found in the *Book of Daniel*.

As I looked, thrones were placed and one that was ancient of days took his seat; his raiment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came forth from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened (Dan. 7:9-10).

All of these descriptions depict God, enthroned in Heaven. This image conveys not only Divine sovereignty but also judgment, as stated explicitly in *Daniel*. Moreover, the Lord is surrounded by the angelic hosts; however, only in *Daniel* is there an attempt to enumerate them. The image of sapphire appears in several of the passages, as does fire. It should also be noted that the earlier accounts are the briefest, and that it was only in the exilic and post-exilic period that the luminaries provided extensive descriptions of their visions.

Accordingly, there is a cumulative effect in that subsequent generations studied and were influenced by the combined legacy of the past. Thus, all those engaged in Jewish mysticism did so by consciously grappling with its literary heritage. It is quite significant and by no means coincidental that the standard medieval term for Jewish mysticism was *kabbalah*, literally, "reception" of the traditional

teaching.¹⁴ So pervasive is this interfacing of motifs that it is virtually impossible to read a single page of any Jewish mystical text without coming upon a citation or allusion to a previous work, be it biblical or postbiblical.¹⁵

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In considering the development of Jewish mysticism, it is evident that it is concentrated into periods of intensity. It has not been the case that in any given century or era, one is as likely to find widespread activity as another; rather the pace quickens, then slows. This is indicative of an organic and vibrant tradition periodically flowering. For this reason it is imperative to consider the general historical contours of Jewish mysticism with its recurring patterns and concerns, in order to better appreciate specific developments, such as the "Circle."

Were one to chart this activity one could point to an early period, corresponding to the visionary experiences of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah, namely, eighth to sixth century B.C.E., followed by a hiatus until the third and second centuries B.C.E. with the composition of works such as *1 Enoch* and *Daniel*. Another hiatus ensued until the mid-first century C.E., which witnessed visionary Jewish-Christians, such as Paul and *Revelation's* John, the apocalyptic writers of *4 Ezra*, *2 Baruch*, and other texts, as well as the rabbinic sage R. Yohanan b. Zakkai and his disciples. This was followed by the period of *hekhalot* (celestial temples or palaces) literature, whose provenance has been the subject of much scholarly debate and is still unresolved, though presumably this literary corpus falls somewhere between the second and eighth centuries C.E.

Afterwards there is a lengthy gap with only sporadic activity until the beginning of the thirteenth century, at which time there was a veritable explosion. It lasted approximately 100 years and was the most productive and creative epoch in the entire history of Jewish mysticism. Scores of individuals composed hundreds of treatises,

14. On the etymological history of this term, see G. Scholem, *Origins*, 38f.

15. This raises the significant yet complex issue of determining which accounts represent an authentic experience as opposed to an echoing of a literary convention. Instructive in this regard are Michael Fishbane's previously mentioned study of biblical texts and Carol Newsom's application of this methodology in "Merkabah Exegesis in the Qumran Sabbath Shirot," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 38:1 (1987), 11-30.

including the writings of the "Circle" and the undisputed jewel of the mystical tradition, the *Zohar*, *The Book of Splendor*. This multivolumed commentary on the *Pentateuch* emerged at the end of the thirteenth century, although pseudepigraphically attributed to rabbinic sages of classical Judaism. Moreover, it is clear that R. Moses de Leon, assumed by scholars to be the author of the *Zohar*, was familiar with the writings of the "Circle." In both the *Zohar* and R. Moses' Hebrew writings, one finds evidence of key concepts from the "Circle."¹⁶

While every one of these periods that we have identified warrants its own study in order to fully assess contributing factors and underlying forces that promoted it; nevertheless, some general observations can be made. Each can be characterized as a time of historical crisis and turbulence. Therefore, the exigencies of history can be viewed as catalysts promoting theological rethinking and reformulation.¹⁷ Accordingly, an appreciation for the historical context is a prerequisite for any informed study of mysticism.

The era of the biblical prophets witnessed the disintegration of the Israelite monarchy and the loss of self-rule, coupled with the destruction of the first Temple. Eventually the exiles were allowed to return, and Jerusalem and the Temple were restored. It is understandable that this prolonged period of national trauma promoted radically new perspectives on the historical process, as well as an intense reconsideration of the significance of the Temple and the function of prophetic vision. The traditional role of prophets, like Elijah, had been the advocacy of renewing the Mosaic covenant, thereby restoring the religious integrity of the nation. It was a task that focused entirely on responding to the current situation. Unlike their predecessors, prophets such as Amos and Isaiah began contem-

16. For a recent discussion of this issue, as well as numerous bibliographical references, see E. Wolfson *The Book of the Pomegranate* (Atlanta 1988), 39f., as well as *Sefer ha-Rimmon* (Brandeis U. diss. 1986), 34, n. 34.

17. An important case study pertaining to events of this century that illustrates this point is N. Polen's "Divine Weeping: Rabbi Kalonymous Shapiro's Theology of Catastrophe in the Warsaw Ghetto," *Modern Judaism* 7:3 (1987), 253-269; see also the references on p. 269, n. 66. Another interesting example is found in a recent study by an Israeli psychologist, Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, who has gauged a dramatic increase in the pursuit of personal salvation following the traumatic Yom Kippur War of 1973; see *Lehigh Valley Center for Jewish Studies Newsletter* 3:1 (1987), 3.

plating the eschaton, the final act in the historical drama. For Isaiah this entailed the advent of a messianic redeemer.¹⁸ Eventually, messianism took on a realized aspect. In the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah, the Messiah, or more accurately Messiahs, were identified as the contemporary leaders of the Jerusalem community, who were divinely charged with the rebuilding of the Temple.¹⁹

According to the Jewish tradition, classical biblical prophecy ended with Malachi in the fifth century.²⁰ This assumption was widely accepted and is evidenced by the fact that according to both the Jewish and Christian scriptural canon, *Malachi* is positioned as the last of the prophetic books. An ancient acknowledgment of the postprophetic period is the assertion in one of the later psalms, "We have not seen any signs for us. There is no longer any prophet. None amongst us knows for how long" (Ps. 74:9).

In order to understand the impetus for the theory that biblical prophecy ceased with Malachi, it is necessary to consider the circumstances of this prophet. His prophecy reflects the disillusionment of the postrestoration period, in which the messianic expectations articulated by his predecessors, Haggai and Zechariah, did not come to fruition. Malachi chastises the nation for their faithlessness; nevertheless, he concludes his prophecy by offering some consolation—the Day of the Lord will eventually transpire and Elijah will return to usher in the eschaton.

It is significant that Malachi specifically identifies the messianic herald as Elijah and not an unnamed, future prophet. To be sure, there is propriety in having Elijah, the great defender of the Lord, return from Heaven for one final mission. Nevertheless, this underscores that prophecy would never be fully reinstated, only that it would achieve ultimate closure. In reflecting on Israelite history and the dramatic events of the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E., the prophets realized that history had run its course. There was cataclysm and exile, followed by renewal and restoration. All that was lacking was for the messianic age to begin; hence, there was no need for further prophecy.

After Malachi, it was assumed that God no longer communicated to the Israelites in the same direct manner. According to the

18. See esp. Isa. 11:1-10.

19. See esp. Hag. 2:20-23 and Zech. 2:14; 6:11-13.

20. See *B. Yoma*, 9b and the next note.

Talmudic sages, lesser forms of prophecy were instituted. "After the last prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi had died, the prophetic spirit (*ruah ha-kodesh*) departed from Israel, but they still availed themselves of the *bat kol*."²¹ The expression, *bat kol*, is frequently mentioned in rabbinic literature and connotes a heavenly echo. It can be translated literally as "daughter of the voice." This reflects the notion that it is not the actual voice of God, but rather an offspring or secondary form of communication.

Presumably, this mediated form of Divine communication was not totally satisfying for some, indicative as it was of partial estrangement from God and a diminishing of Divine revelation. Not surprisingly, within Jewish sectarian conventicles the prophetic tradition continued, accompanied by intense mystical activity. What emerged was a radically different type of spirituality, which combined apocalyptic symbolism and the visionary theosophy of *merkavah* mysticism. To be sure, both of these elements were based on the biblical tradition. Its innovation stemmed from its distinctive concerns, as well as its pseudonymous packaging. All of these writings claimed to represent ancient and not contemporary prophecy. The earliest evidence of this activity is found in apocalyptic works stemming from the second century B.C.E., principally: *I Enoch*, which may in fact date back to the third century, *The Testament of Levi*, and *Daniel*.

The composition of these apocalyptic classics coincided with the power struggle between the Ptolemies and Seleucids over control of Israel, culminating in the ascendancy of Antiochus Epiphanes IV in the second century B.C.E. He attempted to assert control by outlawing Jewish religious practice. The successful Macabbean revolt ensued. Not only did this turbulent period serve as the historical catalyst for *Daniel*, wherein Antiochus is depicted as the little horn,²² but it also fostered Jewish sectarianism. This is evident by the earliest references to the pietist group, the Hasideans, who were active in the revolt. The Essenes also originated around this time.²³

A startling characteristic of many of these apocalyptic writings is the description of individuals, frequently aided by an angelic guide,

21. *B. Yoma*, 9b; a parallel source is found in *B. Sotah*, 48b.

22. See Dan. 7:8 and 8:9f. On the image of the horn as a conquering king/kingdom, cf. Zech. 1:18f. and Ps. 75.

23. For an accessible collection of primary sources on the Hasideans and the Essenes, see G. Nickelsburg and M. Stone, *Faith and Piety in Early Judaism* (Philadelphia 1983).

ascending to heaven. The highlight of their celestial tour is a vision of the Divine throne. This underscores the theme of Divine transcendence, as opposed to immanence. God no longer descends into the mundane world to converse with humans via prophets. Instead, it was necessary for individuals to enter the celestial realm.

Although it is beyond the scope of this work to trace the development of this phenomenon,²⁴ it is worth noting that Ezekiel's experiences are usually neglected in such discussions. To be sure, Ezekiel never actually ascended to heaven; nevertheless, he often claims to have been transported by the Divine Spirit from his Babylonian domicile. For example, we read "and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and brought me to Jerusalem in visions of God" (Ezek. 8:3).

It is significant that all of the early texts and most of the later ones are pseudepigraphic and in general attributed to ancient biblical figures. This indicates that the real authors were sensitive to the issue of legitimization in a society that did not recognize contemporary prophecy. Nowhere is this condemnation more evident than in rabbinic circles. Of the numerous apocalyptic texts that are known, only one, *Daniel*, is cited in classical rabbinic literature.²⁵ Rabbinic disdain for these works is evident by their classification as *sifrei genuzim*, "sequestered books" (= *apocrypha*). So effective was this suppression of postbiblical prophetic writings that almost none of these works have even been preserved in their original language of Hebrew or Aramaic. Had it not been for the fact that in the early Christian period they had been translated into Greek and other regional languages, such as Ethiopic, these intensely religious, Jewish writings would have been entirely lost.²⁶

24. A multifaceted study of this topic is A. Segal, "Heavenly Ascent in Hellenistic Judaism, Early Christianity and their Environment," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* 2, H. Temporini and W. Hasse eds. (Berlin 1980), 1333-1394; see also, M. Himmelfarb, "From Prophecy to Apocalypse," in *Jewish Spirituality*, Vol. 1, A. Green ed. (New York 1987), 145-165. For a recent monograph that investigates the Mesopotamian background of *Enoch*, see H. Kvanvig, *Roots of Apocalyptic* (Neukirchener 1988).

25. Such is the assertion by H. L. Ginsberg, *Studies in Daniel* (New York 1948), 119f.

26. The use of Jewish sectarian writings, now referred to as pseudepigrapha, by early Christians is well known. For example, *Jude* verse 14 directly quotes *1 Enoch*. Paul was likewise influenced by *Enoch*, as will be discussed below.

1 Enoch, *Levi* and *Daniel*, mentioned above, were preserved by the Qumran community, and it is therefore not surprising that the next echoes of *merkavah* theosophy are found in Essene writings presumably composed in the first century B.C.E. The most significant of these are Sabbath hymns, referred to as the "Angelic Liturgy." Although these are not apocalyptic narratives; nevertheless, important themes such as the multiplicity of heavens and the centrality of the Divine throne are depicted herein.²⁷

The Romans succeeded the Hellenists, and the situation for the Jews in Israel steadily deteriorated throughout the first century C.E., as successive uprisings were quashed. Eventually, the suppression of Jewish nationalism culminated in the destruction of the second Temple in 70 C.E. Throughout this period there was an intensification in eschatological speculation as evident in the activities of John the Baptist, the early Christians and the sectarian apocalypticists, like *4 Ezra*. Nevertheless, it is significant that in the first century C.E. prior to the destruction of the Temple, virtually all the *merkavah* material is located within the Jewish-Christian milieu.²⁸ Only in the post-Temple period was there *merkavah* activity in rabbinic circles.

Ostensibly, early Christianity adhered to the notion that biblical prophecy ended with Malachi. As previously noted, even in the Christian canon *Malachi* is the last book of the Old Testament. Moreover, the extensive usage of the prophetic writings of the Hebrew Scriptures by the New Testament writers is significant. It was not simply that the early Christians were seeking support for their views and that they interpreted these texts typologically by assuming that Jesus is the hidden referent of biblical prophecy. Rather, the New Testament writers implicitly subscribed to the theory that the Hebrew Scriptures represent the reservoir of Divine prophecy. Accordingly, it was necessary to relate all essential elements of Jesus' life to ancient biblical prooftexts.

An instructive example of this phenomenon is the career of John the Baptist as recorded in the New Testament. Clearly, John is depicted as being a great prophetic figure. Nevertheless, he is consciously portrayed as emulating the prophets of old, not only in his dress and lifestyle, but also in his message. It is significant that John's

27. See especially Newsom's previously cited article, "Merkabah Exegesis."

28. There are a few other texts to consider, such as *The Apocalypse of Zephaniah* and *2 Enoch* that may also have originated from this period; however, their connection to *merkavah* theosophy is somewhat tenuous.

vision and charge to the nation is simply a recapitulation of Isaiah 40:3-5.²⁹ Whether this portrayal is an accurate depiction of John's activities, or a product of the literary imagination of the authors of the Gospels, its implications are the same regarding the overarching significance of classical biblical prophecy for the postbiblical epoch.

Despite this tendency, which considered prophecy as having become obsolete, there is an authoritative statement that runs counter to this trend. In *Deuteronomy* there is an explicit promise of a future prophet.

I will raise up for them a prophet like you (i.e., Moses) from among their brethren; and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him (Deut. 18:18).

This was seized upon by those circles anxious to promote prophetic activity. One such example, is found in John 16:12-15 and his discussion of the Paraclete, who will complete the program initiated by Jesus. It is also conceivable that Paul saw himself in this role, for he frequently mentions that he was privy to celestial revelations, and he describes his birth in terms that are modelled after biblical prophets.³⁰

It is also worth noting that Paul's description in 2 Cor. 12:1-4 is the first autobiographical *merkavah* account, insofar as all earlier texts are pseudepigraphic. He acknowledges that he had been taken up to the third heaven and Paradise, wherein he was granted revelations, too mysterious to convey.³¹ One can speculate that the strength

29. See, for example, Mark 1:3 and Matt. 3:3. The utilization of this verse in Qumran documents is also significant; see the conclusion of the *Manual of Discipline* in T. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures* (New York 1976), 65. On the probable connection between John and the Qumran community, see J. Robinson "The Baptism of John and the Qumran Community," *Harvard Theological Review* 50 (1957), 175-191.

30. Paul's audacious statement, "Then God, who had specially chosen me while I was still in my mother's womb" (Gal. 1:15), parallels Jer. 1:5 and Isa. 49:1. The return of the "prophet" was also awaited by the Essenes, cf. Gaster, *Dead Sea*, 63. On the "prophetic" mission of the Q community, cf. I. Havener, *Q: The Sayings of Jesus* (Wilmington 1987).

31. A lucid study of this material is found in J. Tabor, *Things Unutterable: Paul's Ascent* (New York 1986), see also A. Segal, "Paul and Ecstasy," 1986 *SBL Seminar Papers* (Atlanta 1986), 555-580.

of his conviction and his willingness to suffer martyrdom overcame the social pressures that forced previous visionaries to write pseudonymously. It seems that only the Jewish-Christian milieu was supportive of such acknowledgments, another example being John, the author of *Revelation*.

To be sure, Paul was clearly functioning within the framework of apocalypticism. This is most evident in his earliest writings, which were in closest proximity to his ascension experience. In both *1* and *2 Thessalonians* one can perceive the strong influence of *1 Enoch's* eschatology, especially in Paul's discussions of the polarity of good and evil. Hence, he was familiar with at least some of the earlier sectarian literature.

Toward the end of the first century C.E. there was a resurgence of Jewish sectarian *merkavah* writings, including such works as: *4 Ezra*, *2* and *3 Baruch*, and both *The Apocalypse* and *The Testament of Abraham*.³² It should be noted that they all were responding to the destruction of the Temple, an event that naturally triggered the apocalyptic imagination. The concomitant evolution of *merkavah* activity within rabbinic circles had a profound impact on subsequent developments in the Jewish mystical tradition. Owing to its direct influence on the theology of the "Circle," it is necessary to explore this phase more fully.

Merkavah mysticism occupies an exalted status in rabbinic thought. According to the *Mishnah* (i.e., rabbinic law codification),³³ it is the most esoteric topic and is elsewhere characterized as exceedingly great—in contrast to standard rabbinic disputation, referred to as a small matter.³⁴ Therefore, it is not surprising that some of the most significant rabbinic figures, such as Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai and R. Akiva, engaged in it.

Moreover, the dating of Paul's ascension is problematic, cf. Segal's comments, p. 557. Perhaps "14 years ago" is not to be taken literally; it may simply have been a literary convention, as it appears to be in Gal. 2:2. An interesting, Gnostic reworking of the Pauline testimony is found in the *Apocalypse of Paul*, in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, J. Robinson ed. (San Francisco 1988), 256-259.

32. These writings are found in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vols. 1 and 2, J. Charlesworth ed. (Garden City 1983).

33. *M. Hagigah*, 2:1.

34. *B. Sukkah*, 28a, and *B. Baba' Batra'*, 134a.

When one surveys rabbinic accounts of *merkavah* speculation, two basic conclusions emerge. The first is that since no pharisaic or rabbinic figure prior to Rabban Yohanan is accredited with having been involved in it, this activity postdates 70 C.E. Secondly, Rabban Yohanan and his disciples concentrated on the esoteric exegesis of *The Book of Ezekiel*, whereas R. Akiva and his colleagues are depicted as having undergone profound visionary experiences.

To be sure, rabbinic Judaism, as it evolved under the direction of Rabban Yohanan and his students, must also be seen as a response to the destruction of the Temple. In this time of persecution and national catastrophe, the newly constituted class of rabbis were attempting to preserve and redefine Judaism. Their enemies were not only the occupying Roman legions, but also the *minim*: a general term for heretics, used in reference to Jewish sectarians of all persuasions, including Jewish-Christians.

Instead of individual visionaries ascending to Heaven, the early rabbis, headed by Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai, advocated the controlled study of the initial chapter of *Ezekiel*, which they referred to as *ma'aseh merkavah*, the account of the Chariot.³⁵ They insisted upon restricting access to this material, by asserting their role as the only authoritative exegetes of Scripture. Presumably, in so doing they were attempting to counter the widespread sectarian involvement in *merkavah* mysticism.³⁶ Their ominous assertion that such activity was potentially dangerous was underscored by an anecdote about a child who was killed when he inadvertently conjured up a destructive spirit. Such warnings likewise illustrated the rabbinical intention to control this material.³⁷

35. This material has been analyzed by numerous scholars. Halperin's intriguing monograph, *Faces*, offers an extensive bibliography; however, the particular thesis that I am advocating concerning the polemical motivations of the rabbis differs from previous discussions. A similar position, though focusing on different material and issues, was advocated by Herbert Basser, "The Rabbinic Attempt to Democratize Salvation and Revelation," *Studies in Religion* 12:1 (1983), 27-33. Basser asserted that "in the Talmudic period a degree of mystic ritual and belief was tolerated by the rabbis, but in subtle ways they tried to discourage public teachings of a mystic nature which they may have viewed as a threat to rabbinic religion," p. 27.

36. See above for our discussion of Paul and *merkavah* mysticism. The visionary experience at the core of *The Revelation of John* is another example of the impact of this particular form of theosophy upon early Christianity.

37. *B. Hagigah*, 13a.

A further indication of the essentially polemical thrust of the rabbinic *ma'aseh merkavah* enterprise is the fact that there are no records whatsoever of the actual content of their mystical contemplation. Although there are numerous accounts of Rabban Yohanan and his students having engaged in it, none of these narratives preserve even the briefest allusion to what they actually thought and experienced. Instead, these narratives simply emphasize the fact that if one is worthy to pursue this discipline, he will be praised by Heaven and his teachers; if unworthy, the consequences will be extreme.

It was only later that rabbis, like Akiva and Elisha b. Abuyah, were portrayed as having undertaken a visionary ascension.³⁸ In rabbinic literature, and especially in *hekhalot* texts, extensive depictions of their experiences are found. Moreover, it is likely that this change was precipitated by the surfacing of original Jewish sectarian writings within a particular rabbinic circle. According to *Hagigah* 15b, Elisha b. Abuyah used to bring heretical books into the rabbinical seminary. Furthermore, it is conceivable that these unnamed heretical works were in fact apocalyptic texts since Elisha is credited with having seen the Divine angel Metatron seated on the Throne of Judgment. This represents the development of an apocalyptic motif. Significantly, Elisha is named in a rabbinic listing of key members of the Jewish-Christian sect.³⁹

It is also conceivable that Akiva's teacher, R. Eliezer, played a role in fostering Akiva's radical orientation. There is a famous incident, recorded in the *Talmud*, pertaining to a debate, in which R. Eliezer appealed directly to Heaven for support and was answered. Nevertheless, his opponent, R. Joshua, retorted that the Torah is not in Heaven. Afterwards R. Eliezer was excommunicated by his colleagues, and it was relegated to Akiva to inform him of this.⁴⁰ Elsewhere we are told that R. Eliezer was actually arrested on the charges

38. For a recent discussion of the seminal *pardes* (celestial orchard) account, involving R. Akiva and Elisha b. Abuyah, see Halperin's *Faces*, 31-37 and 194-206.

39. *Kohelet Rabbah*, 7:26:3 cited and discussed by R. Kimelman, "Birkat Ha-Minim and the Lack of Evidence for an Anti-Christian Jewish Prayer in Late Antiquity," in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, Vol. 2, E.P. Sanders ed. (Philadelphia 1980), 232.

40. *B. Baba' Mezi'a*, 59b.

of being a Jewish-Christian heretic! Although he easily defended himself, afterwards he admitted to Akiva that one day he was conversing with a Jewish-Christian who transmitted a teaching in the name of Jesus which "gave me pleasure."⁴¹

Although the link between apocalyptic mysticism and prophecy persisted until the early Christian period, it appears to have been broken with the rabbinic involvement in *ma'aseh merkavah*. With the resumption of visionary ascent by R. Akiva and his colleagues, the apocalyptic impulse was only partially revitalized. One can mention in this regard Akiva's support for the messianic claims of the revolutionary Bar Kokhba and the apocalyptic subtheme evident in *Hekhalot Rabbati*, one of the centerpieces of *hekhalot* literature.⁴²

Ostensibly normative Judaism asserts that prophecy has long since ceased; nonetheless, it has remained a significant issue for Jewish luminaries throughout the ages. During every period of intense mystical activity, individuals have attempted to reforge the channel of Divine communication. Prominent mystics involved in prophecy include R. Abraham Abulafia from the thirteenth century,⁴³ R. Hayyim Vital in the sixteenth century⁴⁴ and the twentieth-century savant, R. David Cohen, the Nazirite.⁴⁵

During the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries there was a remarkable resurgence of prophetic activity in Jewish circles. One of the more intriguing halakhic works of the period was a collection entitled *Responsa from Heaven*. Its author, R. Jacob of Marvege,

41. *T. Hullin* 2:24; this text was discussed by L. Schiffman, *Who Was a Jew?* (Hoboken 1985), 71f.

42. On the latter issue, see Gruenwald *Apocalyptic*, 157ff. See *M. Sanhedrin* 10:1 for Akiva's condemnation of heretical books.

43. See the recent series of books by M. Idel: *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany 1988); *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Albany 1988); and *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany 1989).

44. The actual techniques for achieving prophecy constitute the climax of Vital's *Gates of Holiness*. For nearly 400 years this material was suppressed and has only recently been published in *Ketavim H'dashim me-Rabbenu Hayyim Vital*, J. Hillel ed. (Jerusalem 1988).

45. R. David was the leading disciple of R. Abraham Isaac Kook, the former Chief Rabbi of Israel. R. David's magnum opus was entitled, *The Voice of Prophecy* (Jerusalem 1970).

would formulate an inquiry pertaining to religious law, prior to retiring at night, and while asleep he would receive a reply, presumed to have come from heaven.⁴⁶

Moreover, at this time a number of individuals, including R. Ezra of Moncontour, are even referred to by the term *navi*, "prophet."⁴⁷ Several brief accounts have been preserved which portray R. Ezra as ascending to heaven in order to receive instruction concerning celestial secrets. The most interesting of these is found in a text emanating from the circle of the *hasidei 'ashkenaz* concerning the anticipated advent of the messianic age.

The prophet from Montcontour ascended to heaven and inquired of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi when the eschaton would transpire. Each of them composed three verses [in response].⁴⁸

It is interesting and significant that R. Ezra is depicted as questioning the last of the biblical prophets about the messianic age. This implies that R. Ezra functioned as a continuation of the prophetic lineage.

Even in the kabbalistic treatises from the early thirteenth century, the issue of prophecy receives special treatment. R. Azriel of Gerona's letter to the mystics of Burgos offers a veritable primer on achieving prophecy. This text played a significant role in the development of the "Circle," as will be discussed in chapter 5. Prophecy is also an important concern of a text entitled *The Gate of Concentration by the Early Kabbalists*. This work was published by Scholem,

46. On R. Jacob of Marvege, see G. Scholem, *Origins*, 240 and n. 88, as well as the recent textual studies by I. Ta-Shema, "*She'eilot u-Teshuvot min ha-Shamayim*," *Tarbiz* 57:1 (1987), 51-66 and N. Danzig, "*Teshuvot ha-Ge'onim Sha'arei Teshuvah u-She'eilot u-Teshuvot min ha-Shamayim*," *Tarbiz* 58:1 (1989), 21-48.

47. For Scholem's analysis of this material, see *Origins*, 239f.; see also M. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven 1987), 91ff., for a discussion of a comparable figure from mid-thirteenth-century France, R. Michael the Angel. Another important study is A. J. Heschel's survey article, "Prophecy in the Middle Ages," [Hebrew] in the *Alexander Marx Jubilee Volume* (New York 1950), 175-208.

48. Cited by Scholem in *Tarbiz* 2 (1931), 514.

who assumed that it was likewise written by R. Azriel. It too exhibits numerous affinities in terminology with the "Circle."⁴⁹

MEDIEVAL JEWISH MYSTICISM IN WESTERN EUROPE

At the outset it should be emphasized that in the Middle Ages, Jewish mystical activity was not confined to any one locale, rather it was diffused. In the thirteenth century Jewish mysticism flourished throughout western Europe, in Germany, France, Spain, and elsewhere. Owing to the fact that this efflorescence occurred in so many diverse areas, one would be hard-pressed to isolate one decisive factor that applies universally. Nonetheless, the fact that the first generation of full-fledged mystical writers in all the countries mentioned above were virtually contemporaneous is a strong indication of some commonality and cross-fertilization.

Jewish life in western Europe at that time was quite precarious. Commencing at the nadir of the eleventh century and periodically thereafter, Jewish communities in western Europe were ravaged by each new wave of Crusaders as they marched off to fight the infidels. These harsh persecutions, occurring primarily in Germany but of concern to all of the Jews, compelled many to reflect on basic theological issues such as theodicy. Working within the traditional Jewish understanding of history as being divinely controlled, many were puzzled by the course of events and sought rationales to justify what had happened. One finds evidence of this kind of soul-searching in the Crusade chronicles that have been preserved.⁵⁰ Accordingly, this was a traumatic period in which theological reflection was stimulated.

The connection between the Crusade massacres and the nascent of medieval Jewish mysticism is best exemplified by the literary career of R. Eleazar b. Judah of Worms. R. Eleazar was the major literary figure of the aforementioned *hasidei 'ashkenaz*. This group of

49. Scholem originally published *Sha'ar ha-Kavvanah le-Mekubbalim ha-Rishonim* in *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* (1934) 78:511. He subsequently translated and discussed it in *Origins*, 416-419; see also A. Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah* (York Beach 1985), 117-122. Kaplan's presentation is particularly useful in that he incorporates R. Hayyim Vital's insightful kabbalistic commentary.

50. A useful collection of the major Jewish chronicles is S. Eidelberg, *The Jews and the Crusaders* (Madison 1977).