

ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

THE JEWISH ESOTERIC LITERATURE IN THE TIME OF THE MISHNAH AND TALMUD

by

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Jewish apocalyptic and Merkavah mysticism are the two kinds of esoteric literature in the time of the Mishnah and Talmud (*circa* 180 B. C. E. to 600 C. E.). In both types one finds the belief that various kinds of secrets may be revealed to men in the course of special psychic experiences. The secrets are mainly those that pertain to the history of the world from creation to the eschatological redemption; to the world and the laws that regulate natural phenomena; and, finally, to the abode of God in heaven and to the divine throne. The psychic experiences in which these secrets are revealed are dream visions in which the visionary either encounters an angel who has been conjured to come down on earth to discourse with him, or is himself raised to heaven to see things there for himself. In the writings of the Qumran sect one can find the belief that God may illuminate one's heart in order to realise the secrets implied by the written word of Scripture.

There are obvious differences between apocalyptic and Merkavah mysticism with regard to the stress laid on the nature of the secrets revealed. While apocalyptic stresses the secrets that render history in eschatological terms, Merkavah mysticism naturally concerns itself primarily with the secrets of the Divinity. The secrets of the world are discussed in both apocalyptic and Merkavah mysticism, but more space is devoted to them in the former. Evidently where the secrets of the divine throne are revealed a heavenly ascension is assumed, while the illumination of the heart which is maintained by the Qumranites does not necessarily imply a dream vision as it is known from the pseudepigraphic apocalyptic books and from the writings of the Merkavah mystics.

Generally speaking, the idea of revelation as postulated in esoteric literature transcends the idea as it is known from Scripture. We find in esoteric literature not only new modes, but also hitherto unrecognised depths,

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of revelation. Scripture (except for the Book of Daniel which, of course, partly belongs to apocalyptic literature) always maintains that the word of God should be equally spread among all Jewish believers, while the revelation granted esoterically is directed to exclusive groups of chosen people. Yet what do we really mean by qualifying Jewish apocalyptic and Merkavah mysticism by the term "esoteric literature"? We shall give two answers to the question, a different one for each of the types of literature under discussion.

A. *The esoteric qualities of apocalyptic literature*

To define apocalyptic literature as esoteric is not only to state, as is so often done, that it is pseudepigraphic – that is to say that the real name of the writer is hidden behind that of some biblical figure.¹ The fact that all apocalyptic literature (except for the New Testament Book of Revelation) is fictitiously attributed to persons known from Scripture may be taken as a general characteristic of that literature but not as its esoteric essence. The pseudepigraphic quality of apocalyptic literature has been variously discussed by many scholars, most of whom think that pseudepigraphy was invented in order to conceal the identity of writers who advocated sectarian ideas.² This may well be so, but one has also to reckon with the possibility that this particular method of writing was inspired by oral and/or written traditions which circulated in the name of and about the persons to whom later on these apocalyptic books were attributed. Thus we may see in apocalyptic not mere *ad hoc* inventions of clandestine groups, but written documents incorporating old traditions the origins of which are no longer known to us. These assumed traditions were put in writing as and when somebody saw in them adequate channels through which, and with the help of which, he could propagate his own sometimes quite revolutionary ideas. Once the way had been shown, others could easily follow, even where motives and purposes did not exactly correspond with the original ones.³ Thus, from a literary point of view, apocalyptic could be taken as a storehouse of old traditions which developed partly in biblical times but mainly in the so-called inter-testamental period, and which were connected with the names of illustrious people from Scripture, to whose pen these works were later attributed. Those who put these traditions into writing added their own ideas, turning the traditions into the private property of circles that advocated the approach of the eschatological redemption.

¹ D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, SCM Press, London, 1964, pp. 107-118; 127-139.

² For a historical review of the problem see J. M. Schmidt, *Die Jüdische Apokalyptik*, Neukirchener Verlag: Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1969, pp. 46/7; 77/8; 171; 219/20; 277/8.

³ See further H. H. Rowley, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic*, Lutterworth Press, London, 1963, pp. 40ff.

These traditions were most likely always connected with what Scripture had to tell about these people. And even in such cases as, for instance, those of Enoch and Baruch where the information which could be gained from Scripture was really very poor and disappointing, traditions could well have existed in spite of the silence of Scripture. One may even say that this very silence with regard to certain persons was the ideal soil in which all kinds of traditions could flourish. What turns these traditions into esoteric lore is the actually preposterous claim that they are the real version of what had happened, even where this version does not exactly tally with, or even runs counter to, the account found in Scripture.⁴ Admittedly, one can never find in any of these esoteric books a straightforward statement to the effect that what is written in Scripture is wrong. The attitude towards Scripture in these books is never negative in the full sense of the term. One cannot find there, as one can later on in the heretical books of gnosticism, the assertion that what Scripture tells is simply wrong. Gnosticism learned a lot from the apocalyptic method,⁵ but a phrase like "not as Moses said", repeatedly found in the gnostic *Secret Book of John*, is nowhere to be found in Jewish apocalyptic. The implicit assumption in the writings of Jewish apocalyptic certainly was that what had been said in Scripture was either not the whole truth or only a temporary manifestation of it. Moreover, in many cases Jewish apocalyptic requires our reorientation towards what is told in Scripture: the biblical account is taken to be either incomplete or misrepresented. Thus the written word of Scripture is treated like a screen that has to be raised, or like an outer shell that has to be cracked.

A good example of this kind of literature is the Book of Jubilees. Here the angels talk to Moses on Mount Sinai and reveal to him a new version of the history of the world from creation to Sinai. Their version of the story differs in many essential respects from the one known to us from Scripture. The differences are mainly in the periodisation of the events as they are reported in the Book of Jubilees, in adding or dropping information, and in the way a good many of the laws should be observed. In some respects the Book of Jubilees resembles Pseudo-Philo *Book of the Antiquities of the Jews*, which gives its own version of what happened from the days of creation to the days of King Saul. But what makes the Book of Jubilees esoteric is the fact that it claims to be the revelation of an angel. It is not a midrashic exposition of the biblical text, as is the Book of the Antiquities of the Jews, but a parallel revelation to the one already given on Mount Sinai. In both cases the process of rewriting Scripture is in full swing; but

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of this point see the writer's paper "Knowledge and Vision" in *Israel Oriental Studies* III (1973), pp. 67 ff.

⁵ R. M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1969, *passim*.

what makes the difference between these two books so meaningful is the fact that the Book of Jubilees claims the rights and merits of an angelic revelation, while the Book of the Antiquities of the Jews does not. This is not merely a formal difference in the style and mode of composition. It bears decisively on the quality, and also on the quantity, of the dissident tones (chiefly the adoption of the solar calendar) struck by the Book of Jubilees. It is only natural that when dissident sectarian ideas are preached the authority of a revelation is eagerly sought. Though the term may seem a little too strong one may still see in the esoteric revelation a counter-revelation. Not everything in Scripture need necessarily be turned upside down, as it is in gnosticism, but a lot is nevertheless changed and remodelled, and hence requires justification through angelic authority. Again, not every book that claims for itself the authority of an angelic revelation should be read esoterically; and there are many passages in apocalyptic literature that assume the status of a revelation and have no secret message at all. Even things that are revealed in a heavenly ascension should not by definition be taken as secret. There is a lot in apocalyptic that belongs to the domain of esotericism only because it is found within a certain literary context. Thus the literary genre spreads its wings even over exoteric material, and one should be aware of this fact when the qualities of esotericism are discussed.

What makes esotericism what it is, is the special attitude maintained by the material to the revelation in Scripture. Esotericism in our case means a special attitude towards Scripture, and the Book of Jubilees is a good example of what is meant here. It claims the status of an angelic revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai; it rewrites Scripture in a significant way; it preaches the solar calendar; it develops its own idea of the Law; and finally it believes in the periodicity of history, a periodicity which marks the pace from creation to redemption. In short, it conveys an esoteric message. This book is therefore worlds apart from the Pseudo-Philo Book of the Antiquities of the Jews, which is not an angelic revelation. It does not develop its own idea of the Law; there is no sign that its writer had a different calendar; and finally it does not develop the idea of the periodicity of history. In short, although it rewrites Scripture, it does not do so in a radical way. As far as we can judge today, the Book of the Antiquities does not propagate any sectarian idea, and its attitude towards Scripture comes close to that found in any rabbinical midrash. It remains on the midrashic level, even in those cases where words which are not reported in Scripture are put into the mouth of God. What is more, events recorded in this book are not described as being pre-ordained stages that lead to some eschatological goal. History is viewed more or less on the same lines as it is viewed in Scripture: history principally shows that God cares for his people. In the Book of Jubilees, however, history is viewed in its totality from creation to

redemption, as being pre-ordained on heavenly tablets before the creation of the world and hence leading inevitably to the redemption of the just as the last phase of history.⁶ To reveal this basic idea the angels have to intervene and pass the information to the chosen ones among mankind. Where history appears to be purposeless, the esoteric revelation comes to clear things up from that point of view.

Notwithstanding what has been said above, the following two points must be made here. First, the custom of reading Scripture esoterically was not uncommon in Talmudic times. In fact, Philo's method of allegorical interpretation comes quite close to esotericism (though no angelic revelation is claimed by him), and there are passages in the rabbinical midrash which are put into the mouths of angels. Both Philo and the midrash lack the apocalyptic *Weltanschauung* which sees history in its totality, from creation to redemption, and which reserves its revelations only to the exclusive group of the elect; thus at least two of the essential characteristics of esotericism are missing from the writings of Philo and from the midrash, Yet on the strength of this point it would be wrong not to view esotericism in a broader context than has hitherto been done. Second, there is yet another reservation which we would like to make with regard to what has been said above concerning the traditions incorporated in apocalyptic literature. It has been claimed here that in all likelihood the traditions found in apocalyptic literature are, at least in part, of old origin. One may, however, suggest that these traditions were invented mainly for exegetical purposes, that is, to clear up the vague references made in Scripture such as the quite disturbing information found in Genesis 6:1-8. The suggestion should be made, at least for the record. In addition to these two points it must be observed that the rabbinical justification of the oral law comes quite close to the concept of esotericism as described here. The Rabbis had to justify the oral law, which in many respects was considerably removed from what appeared in the written law. They consequently overcome this hiatus by saying that Moses received two kinds of law on Mount Sinai, a written one and an oral one. The idea is frequently repeated in Talmudic and midrashic literature and need not astonish us. In a different context one may find that certain aspects of the secrets of the Merkavah were disclosed to Moses on Mount Sinai.⁷ A similar idea is expressed in the Syriac Book of Baruch LIX, where Moses is described as having received, apart from the "principles of the Law", also a series of other secrets.

⁶ See further F. M. Cross, "New Directions in the Study of Apocalyptic", *Journal for Theology and the Church* VI (1969), pp. 157-165.

⁷ G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition*, Second Edition, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, 1965, Appendix C. p. 103.

Unfortunately, practically nothing is known about the life of the people who produced the apocalyptic literature. Even with regard to the Qumran sectarians, with whose life we are comparatively well acquainted through the archaeological finds from the site of Qumran, there is nothing definite known as to their exact identity. Although it seems quite likely that they are identical with the Essenes as described in the writings of Josephus Flavius, there are many scholars who have suggested other identifications. In dealing with the writings of groups whose exact identity (or identities) are far from being clear, it is quite difficult to tell where the safe side of any discussion lies. What is more, the apocalyptic writings have not been preserved in their original language, and in the process of translation into various languages of the Christian Church of the first centuries C. E. much material, mainly of a Christian nature, has been added to the originals. There is also the possibility that some – and from our point of view highly interesting – passages were dropped somewhere in the course of translation. Despite the fact that the writings of Jewish apocalyptic have now been intensively studied for over a hundred years, we are still at a rather preliminary stage with regard to the critical study of the texts themselves.⁸ Final judgment, if it can be reached at all in our case, will have to wait until critical texts are available,

The esoteric of apocalyptic, then, lies in its relationship to the revelation of the divine word in Scripture. Apocalyptic reveals those layers of thought and expression that assumedly had not been revealed in an explicit way in Scripture. In apocalyptic, the eschatological expectations of certain groups within the Judaism of the last three hundred years or so before the destruction of the Second Temple are drawn together. Jewish apocalyptic continued to flourish for some decades after the destruction of the Temple, but the history of the people of Israel proved to be diametrically opposed to the optimistic expectations of the apocalyptic groups. Although there were groups, such as the people of the Dead Sea Scrolls, who awaited something that came quite close to the destruction of the Temple, in consequence of which they thought they would take over as the true priests of Jerusalem, the anticipated destruction only brought more havoc, including their own extermination. With the extinction of the spirit of Jewish apocalyptic, Christian apocalyptic began to flourish, and gnostic apocalyptic soon followed.

In almost all its manifestations, Jewish apocalyptic justified the ways of God to those who found themselves particularly oppressed and forsaken in the course of history. This is not to say that all who thought themselves to be just and yet to suffer from the evil let loose in the world turned to apocalyptic for comfort and eschatological consolation. But to those who looked

⁸ See M. E. Stone, "Methodological Issues in the Study of the Text of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha" *Proceedings of the Fifth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, pp. 211-217.

for it, apocalyptic was ready at hand. To those miserable creatures, the gap between what was written in Scripture and what was revealed in apocalyptic could easily be bridged by virtue of the urgent need for a solution. In fact, apocalyptic helped these people to preserve their positive attitude to and their belief in Scripture. Apocalyptic also maintained that it revealed the inner content of word of Scripture. Thus it is claimed in *Pesher Habakkuk* (1 QpHab vii, 1-13) that the spiritual leader of the sect, the *Moreh Ha-Tzedeq*, (Teacher of Righteousness) received information about the eschatological events hidden beyond the prophetic references of Habakkuk. But – and this is the crucial point here – the passage in *Pesher Habakkuk* explicitly states that the prophets themselves had not been aware of the nature of the truth hidden in their words. Their prophetic utterances had to await an apocalyptic revelation for their inner truth to be made explicit. For the first time we are taught that Scripture should not be read for its external meaning; awareness of the existence of an inner meaning implies not only knowledge of the truth but also removal of all sources of dissatisfaction relating to the prophecies of old. Apocalyptic helps to bring some prophecies up to date, and thus a possible crisis with regard to the relevance of prophecy could be overcome.⁹ The very revelation of the apocalyptic truth was believed by the Qumranites to be an indication of the election of those who received the information for the eschatological redemption. Other apocalyptic books repeat the same idea, though the Qumranites build the whole idea into a theory concerning the various stages in which the Word of God is revealed to man.

We have now to turn to the nature of esotericism in the writings of the mystics. Although there are some points at which apocalyptic esotericism resembles that of Merkavah mysticism, the nature of the latter is different in some respects, and hence requires a separate discussion.

B. *The esoteric qualities of Jewish Merkavah mysticism*

According to the Mishnah Hagigah II, 1 there are three subjects the discussion of which should be limited to a small number of students. The subjects are: adultery (*'Arayot*); the Work of Creation (*Ma'aseh Berishit*); the Work of the Chariot (*Ma'aseh Merkavah*). According to the discussion in Talmud Yerushalmi 77a the Mishnah which forbids public discourse on these subjects represents the view of Rabbi 'Akiva, while Rabbi Yishma'el allows public discourse on the first two subjects. It is, however, noteworthy that Rabbi Yishma'el agrees with Rabbi 'Akiva in the case of public study of the *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, "so that a man may know to spare the Glory of his Creator". But before we go on with our discussion it would be worth while

⁹ For the view that apocalyptic expresses a crisis in the Jewish relationship to prophecy, see Peter von der Osten-Sacken, *Die Apokalyptik in ihrem Verhältnis zu Prophetie und Weisheit*, Chr. Kaiser Verlag, München, 1969.

to quote *in extenso* what the Mishnah has to say about the way these esoteric subjects should, and should not, be studied: "It is forbidden to discourse in matters of adultery in the presence of three [Tosefta Hagigah II, 1 adds: but one may discourse in the presence of two]; nor (should one discourse) in matters of Cosmology in the presence of two [Tosefta: but one may discourse in the presence of one]; nor (should one discourse) in matters of the Divine Chariot in the presence of one (student) unless he is wise and able to understand of himself". There are no explicit reasons added as to why these subjects are to be studied under such restrictions, but in Talmud Yerushalmi 77a it is said of the restriction in the number of those allowed to study the Ma'aseh Merkavah that the reason for this is "so that a man may know to spare the Glory of his Creator". This is an echo of the words found in the Mishnah itself: "and he who does not spare the Glory of his Creator it is better for him that he did not come into the world".

We may, however, assume with Rashi that the ruling of the Mishnah was induced by the desire to maintain a very close control of the master over his students (Rashi Bab. Hagigah 11b, s. v. 'Mazle Odneh'). But reading the pages of the Gemara which discuss the Mishnah (mainly in the Babylonian Talmud) one cannot fail to notice that much that is reported there concerning the Ma'aseh Merkavah illustrates the physical and psychical dangers of which those who study the subject must beware. The famous story of the four "who entered the *Pardes*" is a clear illustration of what could happen to those who looked for mystical experiences without being qualified or fit. Out of four who had the experience, only Rabbi 'Akiva "entered safely and came out safely". Of the other three it is reported that one was driven mad, another died, while the third most probably adopted heretical ideas. It may thus be said that particularly in the case of Ma'aseh Merkavah the physical and mental health of those who attempted to study the subject is believed to be in danger, and hence the speculations of Merkavah mysticism are subject to strict limitations.¹⁰

We meet here, in the case of Merkavah mysticism, a new kind of esotericism. It is no longer the type of esotericism which we have encountered in the case of apocalypticism and which essentially involved a certain attitude towards Scripture. Very little is known about the real content of the Merkavah midrashim found in rabbinic literature, most of what is said being connected with the theme of the dangers which Merkavah speculations entail. Even when we turn to the Hekhalot literature, i. e. the Jewish mystical writings of Talmudic times,¹¹ the stress is again on long descriptions

¹⁰ For details of this view, see the writer's dissertation on *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1969.

¹¹ For a detailed bibliography, see G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*. Keter Publishing House, Jerusalem, 1974, pp. 8-21; 203-205; 373-376; 459.

of the dangers which the mystic has to overcome during his mystical experience. In fact, most of the material found in the Hekhalot literature is mainly concerned with the mystical means which the mystic has to use in order to "ascend safely and descend safely". All these dangers are considered in the Hekhalot literature as means of preventing those who are not worthy from experiencing the mystical vision of the Divine Chariot. Thus these dangers are considered to function as means of sifting those "who are not worthy of descending into the Merkavah from those who are worthy of descending into the Merkavah".¹² The element of exclusiveness, which we have already met in apocalypticism, is here intensified into the major factor to be considered in the mystical experience of the Merkavah.

The main esoteric element in Merkavah mysticism is thus connected with the exclusiveness of the experience. In the case of the Merkavah speculations referred to in rabbinic writings, this principle of exclusiveness entails the restriction of the number of those allowed to discourse together. Later generations added the age and status of a man to the conditions already mentioned as to who may study the Ma'aseh Merkavah (Talmud Bavli Hagigah 13a and 14a). In the Hekhalot literature one clearly finds additional selective criteria, such as the strict obedience to every detail of religious law. We also possess texts which emanated from the same mystical circles and according to which it becomes evident that novices were selected after a close examination of their physiognomic and chiromantic signs.¹³ Similar examinations of the body are known to us from the writings of Qumran,¹⁴ and the Qumranites were also famous for stressing the moral behaviour of members of the sect as well as their perfection in the study of the Torah. Interestingly, in the pseudepigraphic apocalyptic literature the methods of election and selection are not discussed.

There are, however, long passages in the Hekhalot literature which describe the theurgic means by the help of which a man may expect a special revelation of the secrets of the Torah. These theurgic means are more or less similar to those applied in the mystical experience itself, but no details are given about the nature and content of these secrets. Even in the case where the mystic is told how to conjure an angel to come down from heaven and disclose the secrets of the world, no details are given. Thus in comparison to apocalypticism the esoteric qualities of Merkavah mysticism are quite limited in their scope and depth. There is a lot of talk

¹² *Hekhalot Rabbati* XXV, 6 (in: A. Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrash* III, p. 102).

¹³ See G. Scholem, "Ein Fragment zur Physiognomik und Chiromantik aus der Tradition der spätantiken jüdischen Esoterik", in *Liber Amicorum C. J. Bleeker*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1969, pp. 175 - 193; I. Gruenwald, "Further Jewish Physiognomic and Chiromantic Fragments", *Tarbiz* XL (1971), pp. 301 - 319.

¹⁴ J. M. Allegro, *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert of Jordan, V: Qumran Cave 4*, Oxford, At the Clarendon Press, 1968, pp. 88 - 91.

about all kinds of secrets, but little is explicitly said which may help in our definition of the esoteric qualities of Merkavah mysticism. There is probably one exception: the text of the *Shi'ur Komah*, which describes in mystical terms the measurement of the body of the Divinity. Here the generally vague language of the secrets which are revealed is exchanged for an extensive description of the secret itself. But if we consider everything that is contained in the Hekhalot literature as a series of revelations received during mystical experiences, then even the *Shi'ur Komah* loses its extraordinary position as secret revelation, the details of which are described at length. So, if esotericism is essentially qualified as a revelation about the previous revelation in Scripture, then Merkavah mysticism is principally an exclusive revelation and not an esoteric revelation.

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