

MICHAEL D. SWARTZ

# The Mechanics of Providence

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172





Michael D. Swartz

# The Mechanics of Providence

The Workings of Ancient Jewish Magic and Mysticism

Mohr Siebeck

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For Steven Swartz



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## Preface

This book is based on studies of ancient Jewish magic and mysticism I have written from 1992 to 2013. A few years ago, Peter Schäfer, in his capacity as an editor of the Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism series at Mohr Siebeck, encouraged me to bring these articles together in a volume in a more cohesive way. Since then, the current editors of the series, Maren Niehoff, Annette Y. Reed, Seth Schwartz, and Moulie Vidas, as well as Henning Ziebritzki, Chief Editor of Jewish Studies at Mohr Siebeck, have graciously agreed to include the book in TSAJ and offered suggestions for its composition and revising the original essays. This volume also includes an introduction, in which I take account of some of the background, concerns, and methods that have motivated my study of these fields.

In bringing together the essays that comprise this book, I have kept most of them in their original form with revisions and corrections, especially for the sake of continuity. References, transliterations, and source citations have been converted into a unified system by my editorial assistant, Matthew Van Zile. For several chapters, I have made more substantial revisions, especially in light of new editions of texts, developments in research, or revised interpretations. However, I have not revised these essays uniformly to take account of all research that appeared since the original essays were published. It is my hope that the reader will take them together as a set of arguments about how the study of the literatures, phenomena, and myths and rituals that constitute ancient Jewish magic and mysticism can be approached.

Columbus, Ohio, September 2018  
תשרי תשע"ט

Michael D. Swartz



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Many friends and colleagues helped bring this volume to fruition. First of all, I wish to thank the editors of TSAJ, especially Peter Schäfer and Annette Yoshiko Reed, as well as Dr. Henning Ziebritzki at Mohr Siebeck, for discussing this project with me and offering encouragement and advice. Professors Reed, Seth Schwartz, and Adam Becker read drafts of the introduction and made many incisive comments. I also owe a debt of gratitude to my research assistant, Matthew Van Zile. Matthew converted the files from their original formats, brought the references and technical style to a consistent form, assisted in preparing the source indexes, and offered numerous corrections and suggestions. He went *lefanim mi-shurat ha-din* in doing so and this volume reflects his diligence. My thanks as well to Elena Müller, Ilse König, and the staff at Mohr Siebeck for their patience in seeing this book to publication. I am also grateful to the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures and its chair, Keven Van Bladel (now of Yale University), who were instrumental in supporting this project. Some of the work on this volume was completed during a sabbatical in the 2016–2017 academic year, including a spring semester in New York City, where I was welcomed as a visiting researcher by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and New York University. I appreciate their hospitality, as well as that of the Columbia University and Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion libraries during that time.

Given that these chapters were originally written over the course of more than three decades and cover diverse topics, the colleagues who have lent their advice and support over the years are too numerous to name. However, many stand out, especially my mentor and colleague Lawrence H. Schiffman, who supervised my dissertation on *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and first invited me as a graduate student to collaborate on an edition of magical texts from the Genizah; my colleagues at the Ohio State University, including Sarah Iles Johnston and Fritz Graf, Daniel Frank and Adena Tanenbaum, Sam Meier, Dick Davis, and Kevin Van Bladel. I also wish to thank Professors Gideon Bohak, Ra'anana Boustán, Christopher Faraone, David Frankfurter, Richard Gordon, Yuval Harari, Martha Himmelfarb, Rebecca Leses, Dan Levene, Michael Rand, Gonzalo Rubio, Ortal-Paaz Saar, Shaul Shaked, Eliot Wolfson, Joseph Yahalom, and other participants in the many conferences and workshops on mysticism and magic from whom I have learned over the years. My research would also not have been possible without the help and

expertise of librarians and staff at many libraries in the United States, Israel, and Europe, including the Jewish National Library, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Cambridge University, the University of Pennsylvania, and especially Dr. Joseph Galron at the Ohio State University.

The chapters of this volume are based on the following publications. The original publishers have graciously given permission to publish them in revised form:

Chapter 1: "Jewish Magic in Late Antiquity." In *The Cambridge History of Judaism* Vol. 4, edited by Steven T. Katz, 699–720. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Chapter 2: "Scribal Magic and Its Rhetoric: Formal Patterns in Hebrew and Aramaic Incantation Texts from the Cairo Genizah." *HTR* 83 (1990): 163–80.

Chapter 3: "The Dead Sea Scrolls and Later Jewish Magic and Mysticism." *DSD* 8 (2001): 1–12.

Chapter 4: "The Magical Jesus in Ancient Jewish Literature." In *Jesus among the Jews – Representation and Thought*, edited by Neta Stahl. 18–35. London: Routledge, 2012.

Chapter 5: "Magical Piety in Ancient and Medieval Judaism." In *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, edited by Marvin W. Meyer and Paul Mirecki, 167–83. Leiden: Brill, 1995.

Chapter 6: "Sacrificial Themes in Jewish Magic." *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*, edited by Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki, 303–15. Leiden: Brill, 2002.

Chapter 7: "Understanding Ritual in Jewish Magic: Perspectives from the Cairo Genizah and Other Sources." In *Officina Magica: Essays of the Practice of Magic in Antiquity*, edited by Shaul Shaked, 235–55. Leiden: Brill, 2005; and "Ritual Procedures in Magical Texts from the Cairo Genizah." *JSQ* 13 (2006): 305–318.

Chapter 8: "The Aesthetics of Blessing and Cursing: Literary and Iconographic Dimensions of Hebrew and Aramaic Blessing and Curse Texts," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 5 (2005): 190–213.

Chapter 9: "The Book of the Great Name." In *Judaism in Practice*, edited by Lawrence Fine, 341–47. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Chapter 10: "Mystical Texts." In *The Literature of the Sages, Second Part: Midrash, Aggadah, Targum, Berakhot, Varia* (Compendium Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum II/3b), edited by Shmuel Safrai, Joshua Schwartz, and Peter Tomson, 391–418. Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2006.

Chapter 11: "Mystics without Minds? Body and Soul in Early Jewish Mysticism." In *Meditation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Cultural Histories*, edited by Halvor Eifring, 33–43. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.

Chapter 12: "Three-Dimensional Philology: Some Implications of the *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*." *Envisioning Judaism: Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday*, edited by Ra'anan Boustán, Reimund Leicht,

Klaus Herrmann, Annette Yoshiko Reed, and Giuseppe Veltri. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013, 1:529–550.

Chapter 13: “Book and Tradition in Hekhalot and Magical Literatures.” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 3 (1994): 189–229.

Chapter 14: “‘Like the Ministering Angels’: Ritual and Purity in Early Jewish Mysticism.” *AJS Review* 19 (1994): 135–67.

Chapter 15: “Hekhalot and Piyyut: From Byzantine to Babylonia and Back.” In *Hekhalot Literature in Context*, edited by Peter Schäfer and Ra’anan Boustan, 41–64. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013.

Chapter 16: “The Seal of the Merkavah.” In *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice*, edited by Richard Valentasis, 322–29. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

In addition, I wish to thank Sheffield Academic Press, the University of Pennsylvania Press, and Magnes Press for permission to reprint the illustrations in chapter 8; and *Jewish Studies Quarterly* and *Kobez al Yad* for permission to publish excerpts from the Hebrew texts published by Michael Rand and Ezra Fleischer in chapter 15.

As always, I am grateful for the continuing influence and support of my wife, Suzanne Silver, my children, Amira and Sivan. When this book was in its final stages of editing, my mother, Marcella Swartz, זכרונה לברכה, passed away. She was an artist, educator, and activist, who sought to make everyone aware of the creativity and humanity inherent in every member of the community. Her memory and the memory of my father, Bernard Swartz ז"ל, will continue to be an inspiration to me.

In this volume I argue that magical and mystical traditions are the product of creativity and craft. This book is dedicated to my brother, Steven Swartz, who embodies these virtues and many others. As a musician, composer, and professional he has made our cultural lives richer, and as a friend and conversation partner he has been an invaluable part of my life and that of my family.



## Abbreviations

The following bibliographic abbreviations are used in this volume. Abbreviations follow *The SBL Handbook of Style for Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies*, edited by Patrick H. Alexander, John F. Kutsko, James D. Ernest, Shirley Decker-Lucke, and David L. Petersen (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999).

ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung</i> . Edited by Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haase. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1972–
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
EncJud	<i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i> . 16 vols. Jerusalem: Keter, 1972.
ER	<i>The Encyclopedia of Religion</i> . Edited by Mircea Eliade. 16 vols. New York: Macmillan, 1987.
ERE	<i>Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics</i> . Edited by James Hastings. 13 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908–1927. Reprint, 7 vols., 1951.
FJB	<i>Frankfurter jüdaistische Beiträge</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
IEJ	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JE	<i>Jewish Encyclopedia</i> . Edited by Isidore Singer. 12 vols. New York, 1925.
JJS	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
JJTP	<i>Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
JR	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
JSJ	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Periods</i>
JSQ	<i>Jewish Studies Quarterly</i>
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
MGWJ	<i>Monatschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums</i>
NJPS	<i>Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text</i> . Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society,
PAARJ	<i>Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research</i>
PGM	Karl Preisendanz, <i>Papyri Graecae Magicae: Die Griechischen Zauberpapyri</i> . 2 vols. 2nd ed. Stuttgart: Teubner, 1973.
RB	<i>Revue biblique</i>

<i>REJ</i>	<i>Revue des études juives</i>
<i>RevQ</i>	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
<i>VTSup</i>	Supplements to <i>Vetus Testamentum</i>

## Introduction

This volume represents an effort to understand the purposes, world-views, ritual dynamics, literary forms, and social settings of ancient Jewish magic and mysticism and their function in religion and history. It is based on studies on these two forms of discourse I have written over the past few decades.

This book is divided into two parts. The first part concerns evidence for the ritual systems that are conventionally considered magic, from Judea in the Hellenistic era, Palestine and Mesopotamia (Jewish Babylonia) in late antiquity, to the eastern Mediterranean in the early Middle Ages, as preserved in texts and artifacts. The second part concerns the literature of what is called Merkavah mysticism, preserved in Hekhalot literature, a diverse corpus of texts depicting visions of the divine throne and angelic beings, instructions for traveling to the divine celestial abode, and for conjuring angels who will bring the practitioner powers of wisdom and memory. These studies also cover relevant textual sources from rabbinic literature and the poetry of the ancient synagogue.

Each section of the volume begins with a survey of the main issues and types of evidence (chapters 1 and 10); and programmatic essays on the concepts of magic and mysticism (chapters 2 and 11). The two sections then proceed to studies in the evidence for each category, with an eye to sorting out the problems raised by the textual and material dimensions of the subjects (8 and 12), and especially the complex network of symbols, effects, and internal logic that drives each one (chapters 3–7 and 13–15). These studies emphasize close readings of ritual instructions, prayers, and incantations and pay particular attention to ritual and literary-historical studies as ways of analyzing them. Each section concludes with a translation of a brief text which exemplifies some of the dynamics described in the body of the book. This introduction is intended to point to some of the more important methodological developments in these fields and how they are relevant to the approaches taken in these essays.

### I. Magic and Mysticism

This book places the study of ancient Jewish magic and mysticism together. In many ways, the two categories are very different. What do they have in common? Both magic and mysticism are contested categories in the study of religion. Both

categories raise questions about the role of rationality in religion, the relationship between external behavior and inner experience, and the roles of ritual and world-view. Both categories have been associated with marginal individuals or groups in religious communities. For the most part, mystical movements have been associated with monastic or sectarian groups, or small conventicles within elite sectors of a community, while magic has been associated either with “folk religion” or individual practitioners in liminal positions in society.

Within the study of Judaism, each category is associated with specific literatures and historical movements. “Mysticism” is usually identified with those religious movements described in the work of Gershom Scholem and his predecessors and colleagues, especially in Scholem’s foundational *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, as well as his *Origins of the Kabbalah*.<sup>1</sup> Following earlier researchers and contemporaries, Scholem established a historical trajectory that began with Merkavah mysticism in the Talmudic period, extended into Europe, Iberia, and parts of the Middle East, and culminated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the Shabbatean movement and Hasidism.<sup>2</sup> The study of Jewish magic concentrates not on individuals and religious movements per se, but largely on anonymous text such as amulets, magical bowls and talismans, and magical handbooks. Mystical movements have often been characterized as originating in elite circles, as Scholem argued for Merkavah mysticism, or in circles that were highly educated but dissatisfied with the religion of the elite, as with the early Kabbalah. In contrast, magic is usually seen as the province of individual professionals at the edges of society, who were consulted in times of need by ordinary people.

The property of strangeness has also attached itself to both phenomena in the eyes of historians of Judaism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. That is, both literatures abound in details – from long, indecipherable magical names to descriptions of fantastic supernatural beings – that seem utterly alien to modern sensibilities. In the nineteenth century Jewish historians such as Heinrich Graetz wished to show that Judaism was a rational religion and thus deserving of inclusion in the modern world.<sup>3</sup> Graetz sought to discredit Jewish mystical movements by showing they were the product of amateurish imitations of Islamic mysticism, in the case of Merkavah mysticism, or the work of charlatans, as in the case of the Moses de Leon and the Kabbalah of the Zohar. In *Das altjüdische Zauberwesen*, the first scholarly history of early Jewish magic, Ludwig Blau attributed Jewish magic to the unhealthy influence of Greek culture in antiquity.

<sup>1</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (2nd ed. New York: Schocken, 1954); *idem*, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> At the same time, such thinkers as Philo of Alexandria and Abraham Maimonides, thinkers whom Scholem did not include in his studies, have also been thought of as mystical; see for example, David Winston, “Was Philo a Mystic?” in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism*, eds. Joseph Dan and Frank Talmage (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 29–35.

<sup>3</sup> See chapter 10 and the references cited there.

ty.<sup>4</sup> That is, it was necessary for some historians of that generation to portray mysticism and magic as “unjüdisch” and deviant from the true nature of Judaism. In the twentieth century, with the rise of Jewish nationalism, post-rationalist philosophies such as existentialism, and the chaos wrought by the First and Second World Wars, the notion of an eternal, rational core of Judaism – and religion in general – began to break down. Scholem’s integration of mysticism deep into the history of Judaism was, among other things, a product of his attitude of “religious anarchism” as described by David Biale, in which Judaism could not be confined to one, essential idea. It was also a product of Scholem’s Zionism, according to which nothing Jewish is alien.<sup>5</sup>

Thus Scholem brought Merkavah mysticism entirely within the framework of rabbinic Judaism. While many may disagree on whether the Merkavah mystics were at the heart of the rabbinic academy, the Hekhalot literature is now studied as a Jewish phenomenon with serious implications for ancient Judaism as a whole. Likewise, Joshua Trachtenberg’s *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, his seminal survey of Jewish magic, divination, and other related traditions in medieval Europe, included a substantial discussion of Jewish magic in the rabbinic period.<sup>6</sup> Trachtenberg subtitled his book, “A study in folk religion.” In contrast to Blau, Trachtenberg acknowledged that magic was internal to Judaism, even if it was not always approved by the authorities. Subsequently, Morton Smith, Jacob Neusner, and others did not hesitate to place magic squarely into ancient Jewish culture.<sup>7</sup> Neusner, for example, dedicated a substantial discussion to rabbinic magic, describing the rabbis as the “Lawyer-Magicians of Babylonia.”<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, each of these literatures lies outside the traditional rabbinic canon. Whatever its relationship to the Talmuds and midrashim, the Hekhalot texts are a distinctive body of literature with its own concerns, vocabulary, literary

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<sup>4</sup> Ludwig Blau, *Das altjüdische Zauberwesen* (Budapest: Jahresbericht der Landes-Rabbinerschule, 1897–98 and Berlin: Louis Lamm, 1914).

<sup>5</sup> David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979). The phrase “Nothing Jewish is alien to me,” based on Marcus Terentius Varro’s famous quote, “I am a man; nothing human is alien to me” (*Homo sum: nihil humani a me alienum puto*) seems to have been formulated by Franz Rosenzweig in a 1920 essay; see “Towards a Renaissance of Jewish Learning,” in *On Jewish Learning*, ed. Nahum Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1955), 65 (on Rosenzweig’s attitude to Zionism see pp. 64–65). Although Rosenzweig was describing a holistic religious and cultural attitude, this maxim well suits the approach that Scholem, his generation of historians of Judaism, and his heirs have taken.

<sup>6</sup> Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (New York: Behrman, 1939; Repr., New York: Atheneum, 1982).

<sup>7</sup> See Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician: Charlatan or Son of God?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1998); Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia* (5 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1965–70), especially volumes 4 and 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 4:353. See also Phillip Alexander’s important survey, “Incantations and Books of Magic,” in Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, revised and edited by Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar, and Martin Goodman, vol. 3, part 1 (Edinburgh: Clark, 1986), 342–79.

forms, and agenda. The literature of ancient Jewish magic is just as remarkable from the literary and historical point of view. For example, the Babylonian magical bowls are the single largest inscriptional source for Judaism in late antiquity. In both literatures, the names of rabbis and other heroes of rabbinic literature are used in unforeseen ways. In some magic bowls, the name of Joshua ben Peraḥia, the former teacher of Jesus according to one Talmudic legend, is used to authorize acts of “divorce” between humans and demons.<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiba, legendary figures to be sure, but more often legal and exegetical authorities in rabbinic literature, are the main protagonists of the Hekhalot literature, while Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, known in the Talmud for his skill in exegesis of Ezekiel, appears only once in the extant manuscripts.<sup>10</sup> To study both of these literatures, then, is to uncover expressions of Judaism not to be found in the conventional canon of ancient Hebrew and Aramaic literature.

The unfamiliar details of these literatures can also provide an entryway into aspects of ancient Judaism that we might have overlooked otherwise. Much of the worldview and working assumptions of early Jewish magic and mysticism were shared by the authors of the central corpus of rabbinic literature. Merkavah mysticism is based on a cosmology in which God is palpably present in His heavenly throne-room, surrounded by angels who praise Him and carry out his will. Jewish magic is predicated on the idea that intermediaries, both angelic and demonic, interact with our world and by communicating with them human beings can affect the events of daily life. As we will see, (chapters 1 and 10), rabbinic literature and its cognates share these assumptions, even if details of their cosmologies, social settings and practical conclusions they reach may differ from those of the authors of the Hekhalot and magical literatures.

## II. The Study of Early Jewish Magic and Mysticism

To put this volume into context, it is useful to say something briefly about how the study of early Jewish magic and mysticism has developed in the last several decades. The late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, from the 1980s to the present day, have seen a burgeoning of interest in early Jewish mysticism and magic, accompanying a similar interest in the fields of Greco-Roman religions and early Christianity. While studies of magic and other esoteric forms of discourse in early Judaism appeared in the nineteenth century, the contemporary study of early Jewish magic and mysticism begins with three seminal works written in the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> Gershom Scholem’s *Major Trends in Jew-*

<sup>9</sup> See chapter 4 below.

<sup>10</sup> Schäfer, *Synopse*, § 203 in Hekhalot Rabbati, where Yoḥanan ben Zakkai appears in a list of disciples of Neḥuniah ben ha-Qanah who are called to witness his ascent.

<sup>11</sup> For a more comprehensive review of the modern study of early Jewish magic, see Yuval

*ish Mysticism*, the founding document of the modern study of Jewish mysticism, included a chapter on “Merkavah Mysticism and Jewish Gnosticism,” which established the category of Merkavah mysticism as a field of study and set the agenda for subsequent scholarship on the subject.<sup>12</sup> In 1960 Scholem followed this chapter with a brief monograph, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (revised in 1965), which expanded on the textual study of the phenomenon he described in *Major Trends* and sharpened and reconsidered some of its conclusions.<sup>13</sup> Joshua Trachtenberg’s *Jewish Magic and Superstition* appeared in 1939. Although Trachtenberg based his book mainly on sources written and transmitted in Franco-German and Central European Jewish communities from the eleventh to sixteenth centuries, he dealt extensively with earlier rabbinic and other ancient sources for the study of Jewish magic. Moreover, his categories, descriptions of the main genres and textual traditions, and underlying concepts behind Jewish magic are still useful to this day, even if subsequent research has revised or reconsidered many of his findings and assumptions.

However, for the next few decades, the study of these two fields proceeded slowly, except for publications of magical bowls and occasional publications of studies and texts related to Merkavah mysticism.<sup>14</sup> This changed in the late 1970s and the 1980s, when interest in Merkavah mysticism picked up in Germany, Israel, and North America. Ithamar Gruenwald’s 1980 *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* was the first comprehensive study of Merkavah mysticism since Scholem’s *Jewish Gnosticism*.<sup>15</sup> Gruenwald followed the basic paradigm set by Scholem and sought to draw connections between the pseudepigraphical literature of the Second Temple and the Hekhalot literature. It also included a detailed text-by-text survey of the literary sources.<sup>16</sup>

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Harari, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017), 68–158, on which see below.

<sup>12</sup> Scholem, however, was not the first to use the term mysticism to describe this literature; see chapter 10 n. 10 below.

<sup>13</sup> Gershom G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, 2nd ed. (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1965).

<sup>14</sup> See for example Ithamar Gruenwald, “Qeta’im Hadašim mi-Sifrut ha-Hekhalot,” *Tarbits* 38 (1969): 354–72; Johann Maier, *Vom Kultus zur Gnosis: Bundeslade, Gottesthron und Markabah* (Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1964). Maier also produced studies on themes and poetics in Hekhalot literature: “Attāh Hū ’Ādōn (Hekhalot rabbati XXVI, 5),” *Judaica* 22 (1966): 129–33; “Das Gefährdungsmotiv bei der Himmelfahrt in der jüdischen Apokalypstik und in der Jüdischen Gnosis,” *Kairos* 5 (1963): 18–40; and “Hekhalot Rabbati XXVII, 2–5: גאה בבריות אדם,” *Judaica* 21 (1965): 209–17; and “Serienbildung und ‘Numinoser’ Eindruckseffekt in den poetischen Stücken der Hekhalot Literatur.” *Semitics* 3 (1973): 36–66.

<sup>15</sup> Ithamar Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1980); see also idem, *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. also Ira Chernus, *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1982), which compares texts and motifs in rabbinic midrash with themes in Merkavah mysticism.

Two of the most important developments in the study of Merkavah mysticism came in the next few years, with Peter Schäfer's *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* in 1981, followed by his *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur* in 1984; and David J. Halperin's *The Merkavah in Rabbinic Literature* in 1984.<sup>17</sup> Through form-critical analysis of the rabbinic sources on the Merkavah, Halperin called into question Scholem's argument that the early rabbis were acquainted with the visions of the divine world described in Hekhalot literature and practiced its techniques for ascent.<sup>18</sup> Schäfer's editions of the main texts of the Hekhalot corpus transformed the textual study of this corpus. As we will see, Schäfer's innovative editions have broad implications for the study of Hekhalot literature and, indeed, the very idea of Merkavah mysticism.

In the same period, the study of magic proceeded mostly along textual lines. Besides the publication of magical bowls from Jewish Babylonia, which had continued throughout those decades, Saul Shaked and Joseph Naveh published two collections of ancient magical texts in 1987 and 1993.<sup>19</sup> Most significantly, these publications brought together Palestinian amulets and lamellae for the first time, as well as several magical texts from the Genizah. In 1992 Lawrence H. Schiffman and I published the first monograph dedicated to Jewish magical texts from the Cairo Genizah.<sup>20</sup> In our *Hebrew and Aramaic Incantation Texts from the Cairo Genizah*, we published a selection of amulet texts and endeavored to take account of magic in its cultural context of the civilization of the Genizah. In the 1990s, Shaul Shaked and Peter Schäfer initiated a series of publications of amulet texts and handbooks from the Genizah.<sup>21</sup>

As a result of these developments, both fields have undergone substantial changes in the past few decades. In addition to the many publications of magical texts, the most important development in the study of Jewish magic in the last decade has been the publication of two monumental studies around the same time, Gideon Bohak's *Ancient Jewish Magic* and Yuval Harari's *Jewish Magic be-*

<sup>17</sup> Peter Schäfer ed., *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981); idem, ed., *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1984); David J. Halperin, *The Merkavah in Rabbinic Literature*. (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1980).

<sup>18</sup> Some of Halperin's conclusions were anticipated by Ephraim Urbach, *Ha-Masoret 'Al Torat ha-Sod bi-Teqfat ha-Tanna'im*, in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom G. Scholem*, edited by Ephraim E. Urbach, R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, and Chaim Wirszubski (Jerusalem: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1967), Hebrew Section, 1–28. However, Halperin placed the question of what rabbinic literature says about the Merkavah on a firmer textual basis.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* (2nd ed. Jerusalem: Magnes, 1987); and idem, *Magic Spells and Formulae Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> Lawrence H. Schiffman and Michael D. Swartz, *Hebrew and Aramaic Incantation Texts from the Cairo Genizah: Selected Texts from Taylor-Schechter Box K1* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992).

<sup>21</sup> Peter Schäfer and Shaul Shaked, *Magische Texte aus der Kairoer Geniza* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994–1999; 3 vols. published so far).

fore the Rise of Kabbalah.<sup>22</sup> Although both studies aim to be comprehensive and take account of the wide variety of sources available for the study of early Jewish magic, the two books are different in emphasis. Bohak's *Ancient Jewish Magic* approaches its subject primarily from the historical perspective, whereas Harari's *Jewish Magic* approaches it primarily from the perspective of anthropology and the history of religions. To be sure, there is considerable overlap in interests. But as Bohak states in his introduction, his focus is "mainly on one aspect of ancient Jewish magic, its cultural make-up, and what it tells us about its origins and transformations and about the people who practiced it."<sup>23</sup> Thus he asks, "How Jewish is Jewish magic?" and concentrates on the implications of the sources for relationships between Jews and non-Jews. In contrast, Harari focuses a good deal of attention on defining magic, relating the language of incantations to speech-act theory, and integrating methodologies from anthropology and folklore into this analyses of types of ancient magic. These two volumes thus complement each other well and together they constitute indispensable resources for any student of Jewish magic and related subjects.

#### A. *The Study of Early Jewish Mysticism*

In the sphere of Hekhalot literature and early Jewish mysticism, most studies have focused on the detailed analysis of texts in support of selected themes. Most of these studies have focused on questions raised by Scholem's original research: Who were the Merkavah mystics and what relationship did they have to the central shapers of rabbinic Judaism? What do enigmatic terms such as "descent to the Merkavah" and "Pardes" mean? Does the Hekhalot literature constitute evidence for the mystical cultivation of visions of the heavens? These questions have not all been resolved, but efforts to address them have led to fruitful studies.<sup>24</sup> In addition, several studies of Hekhalot literature have focused on individual text complexes, which Schäfer calls macroforms, or a cluster of smaller, related texts, or microforms.<sup>25</sup> Students of Merkavah mysticism have also expanded the range of topics to which Hekhalot literature is relevant, such as Jewish liturgy,<sup>26</sup> apocalyptic literature, and ritual studies.<sup>27</sup> Ra'anana Boustany's *From Martyr to Mystic*

<sup>22</sup> Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Harari, *Jewish Magic*; the latter is a revised translation of Yuval Harari, *Ha-Kishuf ha-Yehudi ha-Qadum: Mehqar, Shitah, Meqorot* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik and Makhon Ben Zvi, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, 5.

<sup>24</sup> For studies on these questions see chapter 10 below.

<sup>25</sup> See Michael D. Swartz, *Mystical Prayer in Ancient Judaism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992); and idem, *Scholastic Magic: Ritual and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), in which I aimed for comprehensive analyses of Ma'aseh Merkavah and the Sar-Torah textual traditions.

<sup>26</sup> Swartz, *Mystical Prayer*; Meir Bar Ilan, *Sitre Tefillah ve-Hekhalot* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1987).

<sup>27</sup> See for example Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apoca-*

concentrates on the version of the Ten Martyrs Apocalypse in Hekhalot Rabbatī and how it adapts earlier traditions to suit the agenda of the authors of that Hekhalot text. David Halperin's *Faces of the Chariot*, which seeks to give a comprehensive explanation for the various facets of Hekhalot literature, contains detailed readings of much of the corpus.<sup>28</sup> Rebecca Lesses's *Rituals to Gain Power* offers detailed analyses of rituals in Hekhalot literature in the context of Greco-Roman magic.<sup>29</sup> In 1991 and 1992, Peter Schäfer presented his view of the nature of Hekhalot literature in *The Hidden and Manifest God*.<sup>30</sup>

From this cursory survey, we might detect an interesting mirror-image symmetry in the way the two fields have progressed: The study of Merkavah mysticism has concentrated more on textual study, especially the intricacies of the European and Eastern manuscript traditions and their implications for the canonical and conceptual categories set by Scholem. In the meantime, the study of magic has taken on greater conceptual and methodological depth in the past few decades, drawing inspiration from anthropology, historical methodologies, ritual studies, and philosophy of language.<sup>31</sup> There are historiographic reasons for these parallel developments. They have to do with factors both internal and external to those specialties.

The category of Merkavah mysticism should be seen in the context of Scholem's monumental overall conceptualization of mysticism as a phenomenon in human history and its effects on Jewish history. Scholem saw Merkavah mysticism as the first stage in a long historical process. That process was specific to Jewish history, but at the same time was an echo of the larger historical evolution of religion that gives rise to mysticism in culture. In his introduction to *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Scholem presented a case for the inseparability of mysticism and history. He did this in two ways. First of all, Scholem argued against the prevalent assumption that mysticism is a cross-culturally cohesive, transhistorical religious phenomenon. His most influential statement on the nature of mysticism in relation to culture deserves a close look:

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*lypses* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Ra'anan S. Boustán, *From Martyr to Mystic: Rabbinic Martyrology and the Making of Merkavah Mysticism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005); Andrei A. Orlov, *The Enoch-Metatron Tradition* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

<sup>28</sup> David J. Halperin, *Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988).

<sup>29</sup> Rebecca Macy Lesses, *Ritual Practices to Gain Power: Angels, Incantations, and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998).

<sup>30</sup> Peter Schäfer, *Der verborgene und offenbare Gott: Hauptthemen der frühen jüdischen Mystik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991), translated as *The Hidden and Manifest God: Some Major Themes in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).

<sup>31</sup> At the same time, each field has not abandoned the conceptual and textual questions with which they were established; as will be seen below, the category of mysticism that formed the foundation of Merkavah mysticism for Scholem has been interrogated more fully, while the publication of magical texts continues with even greater frequency, especially under projects initiated by Saul Shaked, Peter Schäfer, Gideon Bohak, Dan Levene, and others.

There is no mysticism in the abstract, that is to say, a phenomenon or experience which has no particular relation to other religious phenomena. There is no mysticism as such, there is only the mysticism of a particular religious system, Christian, Islamic, Jewish mysticism and so on. That there remains a common characteristic it would be absurd to deny, and it is this element which is brought out in the comparative analysis of particular mystical experiences.<sup>32</sup>

From this passage we can see that Scholem did not reject the idea that mystical experiences had a universal basis. He thus allowed for the comparative study of mysticism as a form of human experience. However, this statement was also aimed at those who saw mysticism as a form of religion detached from historical context, each forming a religious system that had more in common with other mystical systems than the religions from which they emerged. This image of mysticism had been cultivated by Evelyn Underhill and other earlier writers.<sup>33</sup> The only proper way to study a mystical phenomenon, according to Scholem, was to examine it inseparably from its cultural and social environment – that is, as a historian. Likewise, no mystical text should be studied without proper attention to its own history – that is, to the linguistic, philological, and literary criteria by which texts are set into chronological and intellectual context.<sup>34</sup>

Scholem's famous statement is a synchronic argument for mysticism as a historical phenomenon. But together with this synchronic, contextualist argument, Scholem associated mysticism with history in another, diachronic way. In the following pages of his introduction to *Major Trends*, Scholem laid out an expansive case for identifying mysticism as a phenomenon that not present in all times and cultures but is contingent on specific historical circumstances. As he put it, "Mysticism is a definite stage in the historical development of religion and makes its appearance under certain well-defined conditions."<sup>35</sup> Mysticism, in Scholem's scheme, is the third of three stages. The first stage is the era of myth, in which people see the world as one that is full of gods and in which humans and gods are on speaking terms. The next stage is characterized by revelation and the establishment of institutions and ritual structures, which create an abyss between

<sup>32</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, 5–6.

<sup>33</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (London: Methuen, 1911); William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin, 1902; repr. 1986).

<sup>34</sup> As Steven Wasserstrom shows, Scholem was generally unsympathetic to attempts to psychoanalyze mystical writings and phenomena, especially by Freudians and Jungians; see Steven M. Wasserstrom *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 187–90. However, one of his objections was that scholars who were inclined to do so did not have sufficient philological expertise to carry out a proper analysis. At the same time, Scholem famously "diagnosed" Shabbatai Zvi as a "manic depressive" in *Major Trends*, 290–91; and idem, *Sabbatai Ševi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975). Later, David J. Halperin applied Freudian analysis to motifs in Hekhalot literature in *Faces of the Chariot*.

<sup>35</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, 6.

humanity and God. At this stage, the community is “aware of a vast gulf which can be crossed by nothing but a voice.”<sup>36</sup> It is only this stage at which mysticism occurs, and it is the result of a crisis engendered by the second stage. Mysticism acknowledges the abyss between humanity and the divine and seeks to cross it by means of inner experience. Steven Wasserstrom has shown how in developing this theory Scholem was both influenced by and reacting to the anti-historical tendencies of the Eranos circle surrounding Jung in the years before and after the Second World War.<sup>37</sup> David Biale also shows how Scholem was responding to the internal dynamics of Jewish historiography and Zionism in constructing a “counter-history,” in which mysticism functioned as a kind of underground stream of mythic energy coursing through the institutional and philosophical landscape of Jewish history.

For Scholem, the source of this mythic energy came in the form of Gnosticism. As Wasserstrom and Biale showed, Scholem was a party to the rediscovery of Gnosticism which flourished in pre-war Europe and the middle of the twentieth century in classical studies and the history of religions.<sup>38</sup> This framework provides us with several keys to understanding Scholem’s approach to Merkavah mysticism. On one level, Scholem sought to ground this phenomenon in a specific synchronic framework. Heinrich Graetz and other nineteenth-century historians had depicted the Merkavah mystics as a marginal sect of Jews who borrowed from the Islamic throne mysticism in the Middle Ages. In contrast, Scholem argued that the Merkavah mystics constituted an inner, esoteric core of the Judaism of the rabbis of imperial Rome and late antiquity. This meant that Merkavah mysticism could be studied as a dimension of rabbinic thought and that rabbinic literature alluded, in a cryptic way, to ideas and practices made more explicit in Hekhalot literature.

In Scholem’s scenario, this experiential practice carried with it a theological system. God is depicted in the Hekhalot literature anthropomorphically. The most extreme expression of this is the Shi’ur Qomah, which measures the dimensions of God’s anatomy in mathematical terms and assigns to each of his body parts a magical name. But this divine body is a visible manifestation of an unseen God, who emerges from behind the *pleroma*, a dimension that Scholem compared to the Ogdoad of Gnostic theology.<sup>39</sup> For this reason Scholem considered

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, 159–82.

<sup>38</sup> Biale, *Kabbalah and Counter-History*, 129–141; Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, 30–31. Especially illuminating is the dialogue between Scholem, Gilles Quispel, Hans Jonas, and other participants at Dartmouth College as reported in *Report of the 1965–1966 Seminar on Religions in Antiquity* ed. Jacob Neusner (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Comparative Studies Center, 1966), 116–73.

<sup>39</sup> Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 65–71. Ira Chernus, “Visions of God in Merkavah Mysticism,” *JJS* 13 (1982): 123–45, has shown that Hekhalot literature does not in fact provide evidence for a belief in hidden abode above the seventh hekhal.

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