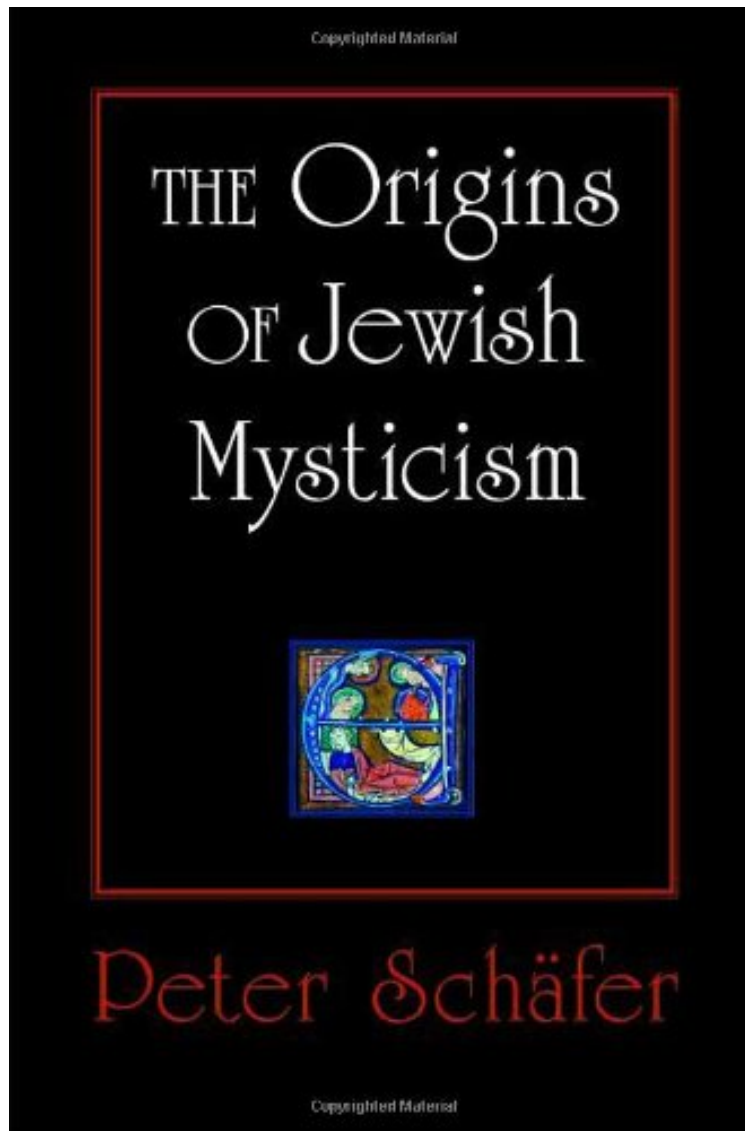


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## The Origins of Jewish Mysticism

*Peter Schafer*

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**Peter Schafer : The Origins of Jewish Mysticism** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Origins of Jewish Mysticism:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Chariot VisionsBy Discerning ReaderThis was an excellent book. It has been a long time since I read this work, but I will try to summarize it's main claim. If I remember correctly, Schafer places the origin of Kabbalah in Medieval Europe. According to what he has compiled, the evidence for similar beliefs before this time is scarce at best, and very debatable. However, he does list other scholars who disagree

with his conclusions. 11 of 12 people found the following review helpful. Thorough scholarly investigation By Wayne Dynes We are all familiar with the medieval Kabbala and its modern offshoots. This book deals with precursors to that fascinating development, going all the way back to Hebrew Bible itself. Viewed in the context of world mysticism, the concept of Jewish mysticism (at least in the author's view) turns out to be somewhat problematic, but the individual strands are of great interest, and continue to influence the modern world in various ways. This book is highly recommended. 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. He summarizes in detail every important ascent text (his term for a description of human vision of or ascent to the divine throne) from Ezekiel to the early middle ages (this in itself is a major contribution when the key texts the Hekhalot texts have lacked an English translation until 2015 and that exists only in a \$200 Brill volume most American research libraries and seminaries have decided not to purchase its author James Davila would have done better to have simply posted his apparently brilliant translation on line since it serves so small an audience; at this point in his career he scarcely needs the Brill imprimatur to validate his credentials), including, from Schfers perspective, the odd man out of Philo. His presentation of the Hekhalot texts is especially useful for the control of the various manuscript sources that Schfer, as the editor of the texts, brings to his work. Just as importantly, Schfers narrative account of the texts includes discussions of the various problems with the texts and scholarly discussion on them, naturally giving his own very learned opinion. Schfers own scholarly interests and predilections naturally shape his own work. A fundamentalist, however, could read Schfers simple repetition of the identity of Ezekiel and the time and place of his vision lifted from the text and mistake Schfers position for his own. This is because Schfer has no interest in the communities that shape the texts he studies (he says, for instance not a single word about Philo Therapeutae). The authorship of Ezekiel, or its date, except in the most general terms, holds no interest for him. He is interested in texts only as texts, to the extent that he sees the way forward for the study of the Hekhalot texts under the category of the history of the book. Schfers larger thesis is that no actual mystical experience lies behind the visions described in the ascent apocalypse tradition (beginning with the Book of the Watchers) or in the Hekhalot texts. He sees them only as literary developments of Ezekiel. The experience of ecstasy is described clearly in The Ascension of Isaiah and the macroform Hekhalot Zutarti in scenes in which the teacher, surrounded by his students, lies unresponsive as a man asleep while his consciousness is directed from the world of the senses toward the inner world of his ecstatic experience (aptly described by the Hekhalot authors as a descent a descent into the unconscious we would say). For Schfer, the rarity of these passages indicate that they play no important part in Jewish mysticism. He also denies that the two passages can be read in relationship with each other (or with the Gaonic period description of inducing an ecstatic experience by sitting with the head bent down between the legs, which we know was a regular practice of the Kabbalists [Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 74ff, esp. the literatures cited at p. 88, n. 90, cf. I Kings 18:42, which Schfer excludes from his argument; Schfer is correct, contra Morton Smith, that Pauls relation of being caught up to the third heaven refers to his own experience rather than Jesus]), while he is perfectly happy to see a continuous tradition of unio liturgica (a useful concept Schfer develops in this book) between the same texts. Another way to look at the passages is to consider they offer a glimpse into the oral tradition and practical instruction accompanying the ascent texts. Schfer preempts this argument by insisting that we have no evidence of such traditions, which is true so long as we exclude these passages. In the conclusion, Schfer takes his denial of any ecstatic experience in the ascent texts to an extreme. He supposes that the only reason anyone would argue in favor of ecstatic practices in connection with these texts is a hidden agenda to impose a Christian interpretation of them, to read them only in the light of Christian mysticism. If pressed he might walk this back to a Neoplatonic agenda, but that doesnt make much difference. It is hard to see how such an agenda could be found in authors like Davila or Idel. He flirts with the thesis of Boaz Huss (fully argued only in Hebrew) that imposing a mystical interpretation on the text is a kind Saidian Orientalism, though Schfer admits the idea is a bit too politically correct for this own conservative nature. Schfer goes as far as qualifying ecstatic experience as paranormal (p. 337). This loaded word suggests that ecstasy is something unreal, akin to pseudo-scientific ideas of psychic powers. I would like to see how he would react if pressed on that point. Schfer is absolutely correct that his text-historical approach is valuable, necessary, even indispensable, to the study of the ascent texts. But we know that ecstatic experience is a real part of the human experience common to all times and cultures. It is a mistake to dismiss as lightly as Schfer does the work that Davila did (*Descenders to the Chariot*) to contextualize the Merkavah experience within cross-cultural accounts of ecstasy. We know from the little clinical work done on the psychological states of ecstasy, from Dostoevskys account of his experience of epileptic seizures (please dont assume I am one of the crazy people who think mysticism is a case of undiagnosed epilepsy rather it demonstrates the kind of experience that the human mind is capable of having; [...] is a recently reported and interesting account of religious mania occasioned by an epileptic seizure, however), even from Stanley Koren and Michael Persingers so-called god helmet (e.g., Persinger et al., "The Electromagnetic Induction of Mystical and Altered States Within the Laboratory," *Journal of Consciousness Exploration Research* 1.7 [2010]: 808830. ), that the mind is capable of a state of consciousness in which it fabricates an overwhelming sense of meaning and

importance attached to the random experience of memories that cannot later be accurately described or recalled, together with a sense of the presence of another person who is not actually there (often perceived as threatening). This state seems to be well described in the Hekhalot mystics descent to the divine throne, his constant fear of being killed by hostile angelic powers unless they are constantly appeased by the right mystical names and seals, his transformation into an angel himself (Schfer does not accept the universally held interpretation of the transformations of Metatron and other figures in the Hekhalot texts as the representation of the experience of individual mystics under the guise of a culture hero, another literalist reading), and his reception of prophecy vital to the community of Israel (or in later texts simply his own cosmic magical powers). The ascent texts can be convincingly read as an expression of the psychological state of ecstasy within the language of Jewish tradition. The degree and nature of the separation of mystical experience from the text is not one Schfer is able to discuss since he cannot admit that the texts are mystical to begin with. The tradition of ascent texts is based on older prophetic texts, which bear their own traces of genuine ecstatic experience; although Schfer excludes from his calculus any text representing traditions older than Ezekiel. Psychological and cross-cultural studies of mysticism must seem terribly foreign to Schfers inestimable text-based scholarship. One could perhaps say that Schfers approach to mysticism grows out of rabbinic ideology. In the wake of the failed Jewish Revolt and the disastrous destruction of the Temple, the rabbis wanted to focus entirely on the text and deny that other forms of spirituality (including messianic expectations) existed, limiting Judaism to the book, the particularly rabbinic sphere of power (a conception of rabbinic Judaism I first learned from Schfers *Jesus and the Talmud*).

*The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* offers the first in-depth look at the history of Jewish mysticism from the book of Ezekiel to the Merkavah mysticism of late antiquity. The Merkavah movement is widely recognized as the first full-fledged expression of Jewish mysticism, one that had important ramifications for classical rabbinic Judaism and the emergence of the Kabbalah in twelfth-century Europe. Yet until now, the origins and development of still earlier forms of Jewish mysticism have been largely overlooked. In this book, Peter Schfer sheds new light on Ezekiel's tantalizing vision, the apocalyptic literature of Enoch, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the writings of the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo, the rabbinical writings of the Talmudic period, and the esotericism of the Merkavah mystics. Schfer questions whether we can accurately speak of Jewish mysticism as a uniform, coherent phenomenon with origins in Judaism's mythical past. Rather than imposing preconceived notions about "mysticism" on a great variety of writings that arose from different cultural, religious, and historical settings, he reveals what these writings seek to tell us about the age-old human desire to get close to and communicate with God.

From the Back Cover "The Origins of Jewish Mysticism is the culmination of a lifetime of scholarship by one of the most important figures in the field. Full of fresh and convincing interpretations, it is among the most significant works on Jewish mysticism to appear in decades."--Philip Alexander, University of Manchester "With great acumen and ingenuity, Schfer refutes the currently popular idea that there was an uninterrupted continuum from the earliest Jewish apocalypses and the Dead Sea Scrolls to the mystical Hekhalot literature of late antiquity. His book is a very sobering reminder that the origins of Jewish mysticism still remain by and large shrouded in darkness."--Pieter W. van der Horst, professor emeritus, Utrecht University  
About the Author Peter Schfer is the Ronald O. Perelman Professor of Jewish Studies and professor of religion at Princeton University. His books include *Jesus in the Talmud* and *Mirror of His Beauty: Feminine Images of God from the Bible to the Early Kabbalah* (both Princeton). He received a Distinguished Achievement Award from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in 2007.