

A Review By Michael E. Stone, appeared in *JJS* 62 (2011) pp. 280-282.

Rowland, Christopher and Christopher R.A. Morray-Jones (2009), *The Mystery of God: Early Jewish Mysticism and the New Testament (Compendia Rerum Iudaicum ad Novum Testament, 12*; Leiden, Boston: Brill). xxvii + 685 pages

Each of the two authors wrote a major part of this very substantial work. Christopher Rowland wrote Part I which is about “Approaching Mysticism from the Perspective of the New Testament and the Jewish Apocalypses,” while Christopher R.A. Morray-Jones wrote Parts II & III about “Approaching the New Testament from the Perspective of the Merkabah Traditions” and “Approaching the New Testament from the Perspective of Shiur Komah Traditions.” Quite apart from the new and varied perceptions of issues in the study and interpretation of the New Testament that each author presents, the book provides a good deal of insight into the particular aspects of Judaism on which they have concentrated. Rowland is concerned with the Jewish apocalypses and their experiential and sapiential dimensions, while Morray-Jones concentrates on the Merkabah and Shiur Qomah literatures, early types of Jewish mystical writing, and the insights they can provide into the New Testament. The whole undertaking seems to this reviewer to be very worthwhile.

It is by no means self-evident that these two sequential expressions of mystical or experiential dimensions of Judaism, the apocalypses and then the Merkabah (also sometimes called the Hekalot) and Shiur Qomah literatures, are each a creation *de novo*

of the period from which its first literary expressions derived. Nor, on the other hand, is it evident that they derived directly from one another.

It was Gershom Scholem who traced a terminological and conceptual sequence from the early Jewish apocalypses such as *1 Enoch* and *Apocalypse of Abraham* through certain texts in Rabbinic literature, flowing into the earliest stages of mystical writing.¹ The existence of this sequence as a sequence has been much discussed and often attacked, particularly in the period since Scholem's death in 1982, though his interpretation of the famous baraita in b. Sanhedrin 14b was earlier challenged, among others, by E.E. Urbach in an article in the *Festschrift* presented to Scholem for his 70th birthday.² Scholem also highlighted the connection between this material and Paul's reference to his ascent to the third heaven in 2 Cor. 12:22.

¹ G. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (rev. edn; New York: Schocken, 1954), 40-43; G. G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: JTS, 1960), 14-19. The place of the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice in this tradition was already recognized by scholars by 1960 (see John Strugnell, "The Angelic Liturgy At Qumran: 4QSerek Shirot 'Olat Hash-shabbat," in *Vetus Testamentum Supplement Vol. 7*, [1960], 318-45), which article was published in the same year as Scholem's *Jewish Gnosticism*. See remarks of Schäfer in the note below.

² The matter has been much debated. Peter Schäfer has set forth the whole discussion with a very clear assessment in his *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), giving the history of the discussion since Scholem's *Major Trends* appeared. Urbach's article is in E.E. Urbach, R.J.W. Werblowsky and Ch. Wirszubski, *Studies in Mysticism and Religion presented to Gershom Scholem* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), focusing on the text on "Four Entered the *Pardes*" and associated materials: see [1]-[28] in the Hebrew section.

Behind this synthesis lay certain assumptions that have motivated much of the criticism levelled at it. It assumed a tradition of mystical contemplation that was transmitted from one generation to another, from one literary genre to another, from one stream of religious thought to another. It assumed that such a tradition of esoteric learning, typified also by its terminology, was shared by the apocalypses, some Qumran documents, the Merkabah texts, Shiur Qomah, and Paul.

Despite changes during the half-century that has passed, this set of issues lurks in the background of much of the present book. While Rowland takes account of the scholarly debate, his case for the experiential and mystical nature of apocalyptic revelation had already been made (I judge convincingly) in his important work, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1982). After establishing his terms of reference in chapters (which will be particularly useful to all students of Second Temple Judaism) he deals systematically with the different corpora of New Testament writings (Revelation, Gospels and Acts, Paul, Hebrews) as illuminated by the apocalypses. He concludes with a chapter on the *Ascension of Isaiah* and one entitled “Thing into which Angels Long to Look: Apocalypticism, Mysticism and Eschatology in the New Testament”. His contribution is very clear and is an important statement of a series of issues that both stand in the forefront of the study of apocalyptic literature and that challenge New Testaments exegetes to respond.

In the section on the Merkabah literature, Morray-Jones has to present this literature and the chief scholarly issues (to some of which we have referred above) to New Testament scholars, and it is, perhaps, less known to them than the apocalypses are. He also has to argue against those who would challenge the view that the roots of the early layers of this literature are Tannaitic in date (the first two centuries C.E.) for, if the later dating is accepted, its relevance to scholars of the New Testament becomes a harder case to make. He does this in his first chapter, Chapter 10, of the book. This is followed by a translation of the Merkabah work *Hekhalot Zutarti* (“The Lesser Hekhalot”), then a treatment of 2 Cor 12:1-12. A long critique of a study by Alon Goshen-Gottstein of the “Four who Entered Paradise” passage follows.

In part 3 of the book, Morray-Jones deals with the insights offered by the Shiur Qomah traditions for New Testament exegesis. Shiur Qomah is regarded by many as a very old layer indeed of the mystical tradition. Its purported subject is the enormous, indeed fantastically large measurements of the Divine body. He sets the tradition forth clearly, and traces its literary influence in a number of works and contexts, particularly some “gnostic” or “gnosticizing” compositions, and then proceeds to a chapter devoted to Ephesians.

Each of these authors has presented a “mystical” tradition of Judaism, one older (on the whole) than the New Testament and the other younger. They have presented very clearly the literature of these two major traditions and the chief issues for New Testament scholars raised by study of them raises. As such, this book provides a fine introduction to

the two traditions. They have examined the corpus of New Testament literature to see what light these traditions have cast upon it.

Both analyses depend crucially on certain opinions, which have been disputed, though this reviewer remains convinced of their basic correctness. The apocalyptic literature as understood by Rowland demands that a mystical-experiential type of Jewish religion and of religious knowledge be considered when reading the New Testament. Such a view offers a number of ways of interpretation of issues in understanding of the New Testament. Morray-Jones has to make his case for the relatively early date of the Hekhalot and Shiur Qomah traditions, for them to provide us with any help in understanding the New Testament. Both authors have faced these challenges boldly and responded to them, opening up and emphasizing dimensions of New Testament that are not usually highlighted. I congratulate them on a fine contribution to the discussion of somewhat neglected dimensions of earliest Christianity.

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