In the present chapter, we shall discuss some of the general characteristics of the Hekhalot literature. In the second part of the book, a detailed introduction to each of the Hekhalot texts will be given.

The first scholar who attempted a serious evaluation of the Hekhalot literature, and suggested a historical sequence for its composition, was H. Grätz.\(^1\) In a series of three articles published in the *Monatsschrift für die Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judenthums* VIII (1859), Grätz reached the conclusion that the so-called Hekhalot literature was composed in post-talmudic times, and that the first text in the series was *ʾOtiyot de-Rabbi ʿAkiva*. Grätz’s dating of that literature is still considered by some people to be correct, though the sequence, which he suggested for its composition is no longer accepted. In a series of studies on the Hekhalot literature, G. Scholem proposed a different order and a much earlier date of composition.\(^2\) Scholem’s views on these two issues are adopted in this book. However, our discussion will deal with some aspects of that literature, which still deserve attention. In addition, Scholem’s suggestion to interpret the Merkavah mysticism as a Jewish concomitant to Gnosticism will be re-examined.\(^3\)

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\(^1\) Grätz dismisses the chapter dealing with Jewish mysticism in L. Zunz, *Gottesdienstliche Vorträge*, 1832, pp. 165–170, as “so nichtssagend als nur möglich”.


The main subjects of the Hekhalot literature are (1) the complex and dangerous procedures involved in heavenly ascensions and the ritual processes required to overcome them; (2) detailed descriptions of various visions of heavenly journeys, including the vision of the angelic world and the throne of God; (3) various mystical experiences of the Godhead; (4) celestial hymnology; (5) revelation of cosmological and other secrets; and (6) the special secret method of studying and memorizing the Torah. From the point of view of literary and experiential genre, the Hekhalot literature embodies two types: the description of heavenly ascensions and the description of the appearance on earth of angels who reveal secrets. A similar distinction with regard to the literary genre can be made concerning apocalyptic literature, but in contradistinction to that literature, the Hekhalot literature gives detailed descriptions of the various means and practices by which the desired experiences or revelations are gained. This issue has already received attention in Chapter One. In fact, the whole of the Hekhalot literature might be defined as technical guides, or manuals, for mystics. A lot of the material contained therein is introduced by technical questions or directives. A key phrase summarizing their essence would be “What is the initiate required to do if he wishes to bring about this visionary or mystical experience?” The respective technical details, the “praxis” of the mystical experience, generally consist of special prayers or incantations, prolonged fasts and special diets, the utterance of magical names, the application of magical seals, and the ritual of cleansing the body. Although some of these means are already known from apocalyptic literature, their description in the Hekhalot literature is more detailed. These practices are also known from non-Jewish mysticism and magic. This fact creates interesting points of discussion in the study and assessment of the Hekhalot literature.

In contrast to prophecy, which seems to be spontaneous and at times even inspires those least desiring it, the kinds of experience described in apocalyptic and Merkavah mysticism necessitated a series of preparatory practices. As mentioned in Chapter One, Daniel—the visionary “author” of [the Hebrew part of] the book bearing his name—marks a transition from prophecy to apocalypticism. He refers to an extended period of fasting and praying before he

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