Review Article

SPECULATIONS, VISIONS, OR SERMONS

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Ithamar GRUENWALD, Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism (Arbeiten zur Geschichte des Antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums, Band XIV), E. J. Brill, Leiden 1980, xii, 251 pp., f 80,–.


Peter SCHÄFER with Margarete SCHLÜTER and Hans Georg VON MUTIUS, Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur (Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum 2), J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1981, xxv, 299 pp., DM 298,–.

With the appearance of these three volumes as well as an increasing number of articles a very lively new discussion of “throne mysticism” and its literary sources or remains, the hekhalot literature, is well underway. The approaches vary greatly and are mutually contradictory; it will be interesting to see what will be the new consensus which replaces that which Scholem proclaimed in Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition (1960, 1965).

The first of the books reviewed here appeared at the end of 1980, although it was completed in June, 1977. GRUENWALD divides his work into two parts. The first, largely a reworked version of portions of his thesis (Hebrew University, 1969), traces the major aspects of merkabah traditions in second temple, rabbinic, and hekhalot literature. The chapters here include ‘Two Essential Qualities of Jewish Apocalyptic’ (3-28), ‘The Mystical Elements in Apocalyptic’ (29-72), ‘The Attitude Towards the Merkavah Speculations in the Literature of the Tannaim and Amoraim’ (73-98), and finally ‘The Hekhalot Literature’ (98-123). GRUENWALD develops the conclusions which Scholem tentatively stated in Major Trends and Jewish Gnosticism and attempts to trace the history of merkabah experiences which lie behind the texts of second temple Judaism, as various as 1 Enoch, the Exagoge of Ezekiel the Poet, the Apocalypse of Abraham, and the Ascension of Isaiah, and the Dead Sea Scrolls,
and on into the later periods. In the rabbinic sources he finds that the relevant texts indicate that in the tannaitic period the merkabah traditions were primarily midrashic interpretations of Ezekiel though they were not devoid of explicit ecstatic experiences. Concerning the story of the four who entered Parades, Scholem argued that the hekhalot literature correctly understood what is stated in B.T. Hag., but Gruenwald argues that the version in the hekhalot preserves the earlier tradition than that in the talmud.

The second part is an introduction to the hekhalot literature and some related writings. Saul Lieberman has provided two appendices, on ‘Metatron, the Meaning of His Name and His Functions’, in which he proposes that his name means the same as sunthronos, i.e. the viceroy, and ‘The Knowledge of Halakha by the Author (or Authors) of the Heikhaloth’.

The second part of this book is the more valuable section. Following an introduction, Gruenwald devotes separate chapters to (1) Re’uyot Yehezkel, (2) Hekhalot Zutreti, (3) Hekhalot Rabbati, (4) Merkavah Rabbah, (5) Ma‘aseh Merkavah, (6) ‘Hekhalot’ Fragments, (7) ‘Sefer Hekhalot (3 Enoch)’, (8) ‘Masekhet Hekhalot’, (9) ‘Shi‘ur Qomah’, (10) ‘Physiognomy, Chiromancy and Metoposcopy’, and (11) ‘Sefer Ha-Razim’. He discusses the important mss which should be used in the study of several of these works, describes the various sections of the works and their contents, and translates large pieces of them as well as commenting upon unusual aspects of them and their terminology. For three works he suggests a rough dating. On the basis of the rabbinical authorities mentioned in the Visions of Ezekiel, he dates this work to the fourth or fifth century and places it in Palestine. However, the assumption is made here that attributions are historically reliable. He suggests that Hekhalot Zutreti is from second or third century Palestine. He mentions that this is based upon a linguistic study of this book by Jonas Greenfield; it would be very helpful if this study were published. Sefer Hekhalot (3 Enoch) Gruenwald thinks was compiled ‘in post-talmudic times, probably in the 6th century’ (p. 192).

The editor and publisher have not served the author well in the production of this book and the long interval between its completion and publication. Gruenwald’s work has been translated from Hebrew and often one can understand what he says only if one retroverts it into Hebrew. One example is on p. 73, n. 2, where one reads ‘the various sayings which refer to God in terms of place.’ This must refer to the title מִלָּה, which the reader would have understood if it had been transliterated or translated with the normal English term for this specific meaning in rabbinic literature, Omnipresence. On p. 66, n. 135, one finds the remarkable gloss ‘Sepharadic (sic) (East European)’. One is thoroughly baffled by the term ‘sanctifying angels’ which apparently refers to מַלַאך הַשָּׁרָא who