The scholarly study of a fundamentally elusive phenomenon like mysticism contains a certain paradox. At first sight, one can hardly imagine a stronger contrast than the one existing between the mystic’s world view, in which everything seems to revolve around the perception of a supernal realm, and the detached, rational judgment of the scholar, who has no option but to bracket off anything divine as long as he wishes to keep within the limits set by his profession.

The mystic approaches reality from a highly personal religious conviction; the intensity of his experience is proof of its veracity. Whatever he says or writes is aimed to express and communicate this subjective experience, even though he is keenly aware that the very essence of his message is ineffable and incommunicable. He is part of his religious tradition. The modern scholar, on the contrary, endeavours to describe Jewish mysticism as a historical process; merely recording facts without giving a value judgment. His task is to keep aloof from the religious tradition he studies. His aim is not to prove that the mystics’ assertions are true or untrue, but rather to represent their concepts in an objective way. The paradox consists in the fact that in his research the scholar is constantly faced with what eludes proof; he studies phenomena that defy study.

The scholar investigating mystical ideas searches for a historical development, a change over time. The appearance of a new terminology or the emergence of original concepts are of prime importance to him.

S. Berger, M. Brocke and I. Zwie/J (eds), Zutot 2002, 189-199
The true mystic will never pay attention to such matters; for him the religious tradition is a timeless continuum, in which at most various aspects of one and the same essential truth are revealed.

II

Even now, scholarly research of Jewish mysticism in many respects is an elaboration of the work of Gershom Scholem (1897-1982), who was the first to study the history of this phenomenon on the basis of an objective and methodical approach. In view of the fact that he devoted practically his entire life to the study of Jewish mysticism, it is of interest to assess how Scholem viewed the paradox mentioned above.

During most of his life Scholem was exceedingly reluctant to reveal his personal views of Jewish mysticism. Fortunately, we now have at our disposal some letters and texts from which we may deduce Scholem's personal attitude toward the object of his research. From these documents it emerges that Scholem himself regarded the philological description of Jewish mysticism in its historical development as the mere 'outside'; the true mystical experiences of Jewish mystics were concerned with the 'inside', the 'core of the matter'. The modern historian of religion does not share this experience with the mystic, but for the purpose of his research has to content himself with examining a text, an indirect rendering of such an experience.

To illustrate this fundamental difference, Scholem used the metaphor of the sphere and the circle. The three-dimensional sphere represents the vital core from which Jewish mystics draw their inspiration. The shadow that the sphere casts on a wall has the form of a two-dimensional circle. It is this circle, the indirect reflection of the sphere, which is studied by historians of religion; the scholar is no longer able to enter into the centre of the sphere. Scholem used to express this inevitable limitation concisely in the words: 'die Philologie der Kabbala ist nur eine Projektion auf eine Fläche.'