

## MYSTICISM

There are two broad problems in confronting the subject of [mysticism](#) as background to the NT. The first concerns the definition of [mysticism](#) as such, a notoriously elusive idea but one that in turn defines the materials to be handled. The second concerns the treatment of the historical mysticisms thus defined. The following article will therefore begin with a discussion of definition followed by a treatment of Jewish [mysticism](#), particularly Merkabah [mysticism](#).

On [Hellenistic](#) forms of [mysticism](#), including the [mystery](#) religions, see B. McGinn (23–61). Specifically regarding [Philo](#)'s own brand of [mysticism](#), see D. Winston. These latter strands are of greater importance to the study of post-apostolic mystical developments within Christianity, although at a variety of points Philo's writings bear on if they do not reflect some of the same ideas that will be touched on in this article.

### [1. Definition](#)

### [2. Merkabah Mysticism](#)

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## 1. Definition

No movement existed anywhere in biblical times under the name of [mysticism](#). The noun [mysticism](#) (*la mystique*) is of recent derivation (according to McGinn, xvi, 266–67, it dates to early seventeenth-century France), though the qualifier *mystical* was used by Christians from the late second century on. Of greater interest than the history of words, including the Greek and Hebrew words related to the idea of [mystery](#), is the way we choose to define the idea we will call [mysticism](#) (for the terms used by the Jewish mystics themselves, see Scholem 1974, 6–7; on terminology, see *DPL*, [Mystery](#); [Mysticism](#); *DLNTD*, [Mystery](#); a lengthy survey of modern theories of [mysticism](#) is given by McGinn under the headings of theological approaches [266–91], philosophical approaches [291–326] and comparativist and psychological approaches [326–43]).

Like [Gnosticism](#) and [apocalypticism](#), their suspected cousin [mysticism](#) has not allowed a consensus on definition. In the first of his proposed four volumes on the history of Western Christian [mysticism](#), McGinn offers a working definition: “The mystical element in Christianity is that part of its [belief](#) and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God” (xvii). By this definition [mysticism](#) does not exist as a distinct religion but is an element that can exist within the various religions.

Significantly, McGinn stops short of including in his definition the idea of union with God, “particularly a union of absorption or identity in which the individual personality is lost.” Given the

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history of what is commonly called by this name, “at the very least, it is necessary to expand the notion of union, recognizing that there are several, perhaps even many, understandings of union with God held by Christians over the centuries” (McGinn, xvi). A constant feature in mystical texts is the claim that the mystic’s “mode of access to God is radically different from that found in ordinary consciousness, even from the awareness of God gained through the usual activities of [prayer](#), sacraments, and other rituals. As believers they affirm that God does become present in these activities, but not in any direct or immediate fashion” (McGinn, xix). It deserves notice for the purposes of this article that according to McGinn’s reading of the materials, “Christian [mysticism](#) in the proper sense was the result of a historical process that was not complete for several centuries,” though “from the start Christianity contained a mystical element” or at least was amenable to mystical interpretations (McGinn, 7).

Though other attempts at definition could be noted (see McGinn; Dunn 1998, 394), McGinn’s attempt merits special mention as it is based on probably the widest historical survey of Western Christian [mysticism](#) yet undertaken. It cannot be assumed that a definition based on a study of Christian [mysticism](#) will be a reliable guide to the presence of non-Christian mysticisms during the first century and earlier, but it provides a place to start, and it is an appropriate starting point so long as we ask our questions from within an overtly Christian frame of reference.

The leading name among scholars of Jewish [mysticism](#), G. Scholem (1897–1982), takes up the question of definition in the first chapter of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1954, from which the following summary derives; see also Scholem 1974, which is an expanded reprint of his contributions to the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*; Scholem 1965). In preliminary fashion Scholem rejects as too broad an equation of [mysticism](#) with any experiential form of religion that is concerned with humanity’s immediate experience of a divine presence, and he rejects as too narrow any definition that is restricted to an ultimate loss of the mystic’s individuality through union with God. Moreover, and significantly, there can be no thought of an abstract mystical religion: “there is only the [mysticism](#) of a particular religious system, Christian, Islamic, Jewish [mysticism](#) and so on” (Scholem 1954, 6). This is not to deny that there are common characteristics among the mysticisms, but it is to deny that there is any such thing as an ideal [mysticism](#) of which the various manifestations are imperfect forms.

Scholem’s own definition proceeds from the basic conviction that “[mysticism](#) is a definite stage in the historical development of religion and makes its appearance under certain well-defined conditions. It is connected with, and inseparable from, a certain stage of the religious consciousness” (Scholem 1954, 7). According to this evolutionary [model](#), the initial, mythical stage of religion posits no abyss between humanity and deity. Humanity and the gods relate directly so that [mysticism](#) is excluded.

The second stage, classical religion, involves the [creation](#) of the abyss that cannot be bridged. The religious community “becomes aware of a fundamental duality, of a vast gulf which can be crossed by nothing but the *voice*” of God in [revelation](#) and the voice of humanity in [prayer](#) (Scholem 1954, 7). The [creation](#) of this abyss, which is the “supreme function” of religion, is antithetical to [mysticism](#).

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It is the third, the romantic epoch, that, recognizing the abyss, “proceeds to a quest for the secret that will close it in, the hidden path that will span it” (Scholem 1954, 8). This is the mystical stage, involving the discovery of new religious impulses that reinterpret the old religious values of the classical stage and suggest new meanings in line with the directness of mystical experience. “Mystical religion seeks to transform the God whom it encounters in the peculiar religious consciousness of its own social environment from an object of dogmatic [knowledge](#) into a novel and living experience and intuition. In addition, it also seeks to interpret this experience in a new way” (Scholem 1954, 10; Gruenwald 1995, 8, comments similarly that “[mysticism](#) may be described as a live realization of theological notions or entities”).

Thus Jewish [mysticism](#) “in its various forms represents an attempt to interpret the religious values of [Judaism](#) in terms of mystical values” (Scholem 1954, 10). Concentrating on the idea of God who manifests himself in the acts of [creation](#), [revelation](#) and [redemption](#), Jewish mystical meditation ultimately “gives birth to the conception of a sphere, a whole realm of divinity, which underlies the world of our sense-data and which is present and active in all that exists” (Scholem 1954, 10–11; this last comment relates especially to the *Sefirot*, which will be mentioned in [2.1](#) below). Associated with this enterprise is a distinctive technique that employs unique symbols and rituals and brings about the state of ecstasy necessary for the experience.

This is not the place to explain further or critique this definition of Jewish [mysticism](#), but it will be clear from the foregoing that in Scholem’s view Jewish [mysticism](#) is a necessary stage in the evolution of the Jewish religion (and religions can pass through this sequence more than once), and that as such it is sui generis. It is enough to have noted the attempts of two outstanding students of the subject and so to have been reminded of the difficulty of defining this area and of the linkage between definition and historical investigation.

## 2. Merkabah Mysticism

The history of Jewish [mysticism](#) will depend on our definition of [mysticism](#) as such, and in Scholem’s [model](#) the first phase of Jewish [mysticism](#), Merkabah [mysticism](#), runs from the first century B.C. to the tenth century A.D., having its roots in the end of the Second Temple era when the conditions of Scholem’s third stage of religion prevailed; he notes “the struggle taking place in this period between different religious forces, and ... the tendency then current to delve more deeply into original religious speculation” (Scholem 1974, 10); differing definitions will trace Jewish [mysticism](#) into the OT period (see [2.2.1](#) below), and one must also allow for other strands within early [Judaism](#).

**2.1. Synopsis.** It will be helpful to provide a synopsis of what we mean by Merkabah [mysticism](#) before surveying the evidence adduced for its existence and development. The following summary uses Scholem’s seminal characterization as a starting point with certain qualifications added from the more recent models, some of which depart in significant ways from Scholem’s work. The main lines of this profile are drawn from the fifth century and later *Hekhalot* texts, which are themselves inharmonious,

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but at various points there is assumed an essential continuity with earlier apocalyptic and [rabbinic](#) sources.

Merkabah [mysticism](#) “is used to refer to an esoteric, visionary-mystical [tradition](#) centred upon the vision of God seated on the celestial throne or Merkabah” (Morrison-Jones 1992, 2). “Its [essence](#) is not absorbed contemplation of God’s true nature, but [perception](#) of his appearance on the throne, as described by Ezekiel, and [cognition](#) of the mysteries of the celestial throne-world... God’s preexisting throne, which embodies and exemplifies all forms of [creation](#), is at once the goal and the theme of his mystical vision” (Scholem 1954, 44). The term *Merkabah* (“throne-chariot”) is not used in the text of Ezekiel but is first used in reference to Ezekiel’s vision in [Sirach 49:8](#) (cf. [1 Chron 28:18](#); see [Sirach](#)) and also frequently in the scrolls from [Qumran](#). The term *hammerkabah* is often used in Talmudic literature as a shorthand title for [Ezekiel 1](#).

The expression *Maaseh Merkabah* (“the Account of the Chariot”) refers to the esoteric [tradition](#) of [exegesis](#) of [Ezekiel 1](#) and related texts (esp. [Dan 7](#); [Is 6](#)), [exegesis](#) that could be related to mystical experiences and practices of [ascent](#) to the throne. The ascent through seven heavens is characteristic of these texts, and correspondingly there is mention of seven Merkabah along with the *Hekhalot* (“chambers,” “palaces,” “temples”) of the Merkabah. The latter idea of the *Hekhalot* is possibly a later development, but it became dominant. Though scholarship has traced these mystical practices or traditions into the first century A.D. and earlier, its classical period ran from the fourth to sixth centuries, and its outstanding documents were edited in the fifth and sixth centuries. These documents are among the *Hekhalot* tracts (see [2.2.6](#) below), so named because of the importance of “descriptions of the *hekhaloth*, the heavenly halls or palaces through which the visionary passes and in the seventh and last of which there rises the throne of divine [glory](#)” (Scholem 1954, 45).

Recent scholarship has preferred to stress that the *Hekhalot* texts represent just one development of the Merkabah [tradition](#) along with the apocalypses and other Jewish, Christian and [gnostic](#) texts (Morrison-Jones 1992, 2; note for example that the term *Merkabah* features prominently in the relevant [Qumran](#) materials), though the relationship of the ideas expressed in these sources and the continuity of the movement are matters of dispute.

A strand of speculation related to *Maaseh Merkabah* and also developing during the first six centuries was *Maaseh Bereshit* (“the Account of Creation”). Focusing chiefly on the Genesis account of [creation](#), this was an esoteric and theoretical approach to the problems of [cosmology](#) and cosmogony. Little of this teaching was leaked to outsiders, but an important exception is *Sefer Yetsirah* (The Book of Creation), which has been variously dated from the late second/ early third century A.D. (in an earlier form) to the ninth century. The work is thought to have been written by and for educated rabbis as an explanation of the [creation](#) story of Genesis and as instruction in creative [magic](#) (on permissible [magic](#), see [b. Sanh. 67a](#)). “Its chief subject matters are the elements of the world, which are sought in the ten elementary and primordial numbers—*Sefiroth*, as the book calls them—and the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. These together represent the mysterious forces whose convergence has produced the various combinations observable throughout the whole of [creation](#); they are the ‘thirty-two secret paths of Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

wisdom,' through which God has created all that exists" (Scholem 1954, 76; see further Blumenthal, 6–46; through comparison with Assyrian materials, Parpola [1993], has traced the roots of the Sefirotic Tree, a symbolic configuration of the Sefirot, into the early thirteenth century B.C.).

This inauguration of the Sefirot terminology is noted by I. Gruenwald (1995, 10) as the turning point in the history of Jewish [mysticism](#), leading to a distinct phase of Jewish [mysticism](#), subsequent to the Merkabah phase, namely, Kabbalah ("reception," "[tradition](#)"; on the need to distinguish these phases see Gruenwald 1995, 10), although it must be noted that the term *Kabbalah* is sometimes used to cover the whole mystical movement of [Judaism](#) from Talmudic times to the present.

It is argued that behind the [tradition](#) of Merkabah [mysticism](#) existed a movement, originating in Palestine and organized into esoteric groups making up a school of mystics who were not prepared to reveal their secret [knowledge](#) due to its controversial nature. These mystics came to refer to themselves as *Yorde Merkabah*, "Descenders to the Merkabah," though the choice of the descent motif rather than ascent has resisted explanation (the motif of descent might have originated c. A.D. 500). These groups were organized around a master who initiated his group into the [tradition's](#) teachings and also demonstrated in their presence the ascent to the Merkabah. Entrance into these groups was conditioned on certain criteria, especially intellectual conditions and age limits ("life's halfway stage"), as well as moral and physical criteria (the latter including physiognomy and chiromancy).

Those who passed the test were worthy to make the ascent, and the primary interests of the *Hekhalot* texts are their preparation and technique for the ascent as well as what was perceived on the voyage. Preparation for the ascent involved fasting, eating special foods or bathing. The ascent was then effected by techniques that would seem designed to effect a trancelike state, especially the recitation of hymns, [prayers](#) or magical incantations that featured the rhythmical repetition of words, sounds or ideas, possibly whispered while placing the head between the knees (cf. [1 Kings 18:42](#); Gilgamesh, in the Epic of Gilgamesh, uses a similar technique for attaining dreams; see Parpola 1993, 192 n. 120). In the resulting state of ecstasy the journey took place.

The *Hekhalot* texts do not give much information about the ascent through the heavens, but they do describe the movement of the soul through the seven concentrically arranged *Hekhalot* (palaces) in the seventh [heaven](#) (aside from 3 [Enoch](#) [an apocalypse; see [Enoch, Books of](#)] and *Massekhet Hekhalot* [a [midrashic](#) compilation] the instructional *Hekhalot* texts appear to equate the *Hekhalot* with the heavenly levels rather than locating them in the seventh [heaven](#); cf. Morray-Jones 1993, 179–80). The progress of the soul is blocked by a series of angelic gatekeepers. Success in the journey depends, then, on the [knowledge](#) of secret names, [magic](#) seals derived from the Merkabah itself that function as passes and put the hostile [angels](#) to flight.

As the journey progresses the struggle increases with the result that longer and more complicated magical formulas are needed in order to break through. Theurgy is prominent throughout this literature (theurgy is a form of [magic](#), roughly described "as the '[science](#)' of coercing the gods, and particularly of bringing about changes in divine realms"; see further Gruenwald 1995, 40–41). The journey is perilous,

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not only because of the hostile [angels](#) but also because the mystic must undergo a fiery transformation that threatens to devour the unworthy (on transformation, see [2.2.2](#); [2.2.5](#); [2.2.6](#); [3](#) below). The entire experience takes place in an atmosphere of majesty, fear and trembling, with an almost exclusive focus on God's otherness. Even the climax of the ascent involves a seeing and hearing in the presence of the throne with no suggestion of absorption or mystical union. Correspondingly there is in this literature no focus on the presence of God or on love of God but primarily an occupation with God as the holy King.

The purpose of the ascent could vary between the mere desire to view God's [glory](#) and join in the heavenly angelic [worship](#), the more practical desire to gain [knowledge](#) of benefit to oneself (e.g., [knowledge](#) of what was about to happen) and the desire to gain revelatory [knowledge](#) of more ultimate consequence. The vision of the celestial realm, the songs of the [angels](#) and the structure of the Merkabah were among the subjects of esoteric [knowledge](#), and of equal importance to these was the appearance of God in his aspect of Creator enthroned on the Merkabah. The description of this gigantic human form (cf. [Ezek 1:26–28](#)) became the subject of the *Shiur Komah* ("Dimensions of the Body") texts and passages, which drew on the imagery and language of OT passages such as [Isaiah 6:1–4](#); [66:1](#) and especially [Song of Solomon 5](#) (in this connection, the defense of Song of Solomon's canonicity by Rabbi Akiba [[t. Sanh. 12:10](#)], one of the early rabbis associated with Merkabah [mysticism](#), is significant; Scholem 1965, 38–40, notes other evidence for the dating of these traditions as early as the third century A.D.).

In the *Hekhalot* texts a distinction is maintained between God as he is in himself and his visible, corporeal manifestation upon his descent to the seventh [heaven](#) so as to be worshiped by his [creation](#). This manifestation of God on the throne was referred to as "the Glory," "the Great Glory" or "the Power" (cf. [Ezek 1:28](#); [T. Levi 2:4](#); [1 Enoch 14:20–21](#); some associate the Simon of [Acts 8:10](#) with this idea), which in some sources could be identified with the "Name" or "Word/Logos" of God (Murray-Jones 1992, 2–5).

A variety of other aspects of this speculation are brought forth for comparison with NT texts, but space forbids even a summary of them here. Just one more will be mentioned: the figure of Metatron-[Enoch](#). The etymology and meaning of the name *Metatron* is not yet clear, but there appear to be two main sides to his character (see Murray-Jones 1992, 7–14). He is the "Angel of the Lord" or "Prince of the Presence," a Name-bearing angel ([Ex 23:21](#)) who mediates and to some extent embodies the divine Glory. The [Judaism](#) represented by the Babylonian [Talmud](#) is suspicious of this figure, associating him in two of its three allusions to him with the heretical notion that another Power existed in [heaven](#) equal to God (the so-called Two Powers [heresy](#); the three references are [b. 'Abod. Zar. 3b](#); [b. Hag. 15a](#) [cf. [3 Enoch 16](#)]; [b. Sanh. 38b](#)), but this negative attitude is understood to confirm the existence of more positive interest in Metatron by other early strands of [Judaism](#). Presumably the latter would be the esoteric strand of Merkabah mystics who would later give birth to the *Hekhalot* texts.

However, some texts relate how the famous [Enoch](#) was transformed in the course of his ascent into an angelic figure and go on to identify Metatron with the transformed [Enoch](#) (e.g., [3 Enoch 7–15](#)). Once again, it is possible to find indications in earlier rabbinic and apocalyptic traditions that this idea of the

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transformation of an exceptionally righteous person into an angelic figure, possibly even identified with the enthroned Glory (*kābôd*), has early roots (see Morray-Jones 1992, 10–11, where he also draws the parallel with the Jesus traditions in [2 Cor 4:3–6](#); [Col 1:15](#); [2:9](#); [Jn 17:6–12](#); [Phil 2:9–11](#); [Heb 1:2–4](#)).

It was mentioned that rabbinic texts appear to indicate an unease with aspects of Merkabah [mysticism](#). It would seem that possible causes of this unease would be the threat of new [revelation](#) and the perceived tendency to compromise monotheism. Yet the authors of the *Hekhalot* literature were concerned to stress their continuity with [rabbinic Judaism](#) by associating their teachings with names such as Rabbi Akiba, Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai (all late first to early second century A.D.; these connections are attested by [Talmud](#) and [midrash](#) as well), by striving to remain within the bounds of monotheism and by paying due respect to [Torah](#). It is probable that some within this movement did operate from within orthodox [Judaism](#), and the official tendency seems to have been to control rather than ban these teachings. (On the relationship of Merkabah [mysticism](#) and [Gnosticism](#), see Scholem 1965; P. Alexander, [236–38](#); Gruenwald 1982. On the forces giving shape to Merkabah [mysticism](#), see Alexander, 238–39.)

**2.2. Literary Evidence.** Since we have no continuous literary evidence of Jewish [mysticism](#) from its earliest to its later forms there is great difficulty in speaking of historical continuity and a real question as to how much of the later material can be read back into the first century. An additional complication for the NT scholar stems from the growing tendency to use the NT itself as evidence for the first-century currency of Jewish ideas. The latter tendency is methodologically sound from the standpoint of writing a general history of thought, but it is difficult to avoid allowing this circular argument to become viciously circular. Until further evidence comes to light we are without sufficient external controls on the largely speculative reconstructions surrounding, for example, [2 Corinthians 12](#). At the same time it should be recalled that the Jewish esoteric traditions that found expression in the rabbinic literature were purposely not written down until well after the first century, and in this article we are dealing with Jewish esoteric traditions. The later date of the *Hekhalot* texts should not be overpressed against the case for the early origins of the ideas expressed therein.

For his part Scholem (1954, 43) speaks of three stages in the development of early Jewish Merkabah [mysticism](#): “the [anonymous](#) conventicles of the old apocalypics; the Merkabah speculation of the Mishnaic teachers who are known to us by name; and the Merkabah [mysticism](#) of late and post-Talmudic times, as reflected in the literature which has come down to us.” Taken together, the three stages manifest an “essential continuity of thought.” D. Halperin, however, argues that there is no evidence within the tannaitic literature itself for the practice of ascent or for its association with *Maaseh Merkabah*. In this period *Maaseh Merkabah* involved simply the public [exegesis](#) of [Ezekiel 1](#). This does not mean that Scholem’s [model](#) is wrong, but it would remove positive evidence for the middle stage. And I. Gruenwald issues the caveat that “literary similarity [between earlier and later texts] may point to historical affiliation, but need not of necessity do so” (1995, 32 n. 55). He adds, “generally speaking, scholarly work has still a long way to go before a clear cut case can be made concerning the evidential historical-continuity between trends spread out over hundreds of years, and more.”

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When speaking of Merkabah [mysticism](#) we might treat the strands of evidence as follows: OT, apocalyptic, [Qumran](#), NT, rabbinic and *Hekhalot* texts.

2.2.1. *Old Testament*. OT texts that became a focus or springboard for the later [mysticism](#) are [Ezekiel 1](#); [3:12–13](#); [10](#); [Isaiah 6:1–4](#); [Exodus 24:10–11](#); and [Daniel 7:9–14](#). Others deserving mention are [1 Kings 22](#) and [Job 1](#). Though some scholars have argued that these and other OT texts evidence the existence of mystical trends in OT times, Scholem himself stated that “it is almost certain that the phenomena which they connected with [mysticism](#) ... belong to other strands in the history of religion” (Scholem 1974, 10). Yet Gruenwald, on the basis of a “relaxed definition” (Gruenwald 1995, 27) of [mysticism](#), argues in favor of the idea “that there are mystical elements in [OT] Scripture itself.” Of related interest is the recent work of S. Parpola on Assyrian prophecies, in which he seeks “to correlate the Assyrian data with related phenomena, especially OT prophecy, [Gnosticism](#) and Jewish [mysticism](#)” (Parpola 1997, XVI; cf. Parpola 1993).

2.2.2. *Apocalyptic Literature*. The earliest Jewish account of an ascent to [heaven](#) and vision of the divine throne outside of the [Hebrew Bible](#) is [1 Enoch 14:8–25](#) ([1 Enoch 71:5–11](#) is thought to depend on this passage; see also [1 Enoch 18:8](#)), which draws on [Ezekiel 1](#) and [10](#), [Isaiah 6](#) and [Daniel 7:9–10](#). Parpola (1993, 195) believes that the secret of the ascent to [heaven](#) “was the precious secret that Gilgamesh brought back from his journey to Utnapishtim.” The only other pre-Christian description of an ascent in a Semitic language is Levi’s in the Aramaic Levi apocryphon from [Qumran](#) (cf. [T. Levi 2–3](#)). At the least these passages evidence interest in the idea of an ascent to the throne of God, and possibly the currency of the mystical practice.

If we broaden our view to include early but not necessarily pre-Christian apocalyptic passages, a variety of features can be found that parallel the picture derived from the later sources (for the following, see esp. Alexander, 247–49). In [1 Enoch 61:10–12](#) (Book of the Similitudes; end of the first century A.D.) we encounter a similar angelology. Likewise the transformation of [Enoch](#) in [1 Enoch 70–71](#) into the Son of Man can be placed alongside the later mystical idea that “exceptionally worthy human beings or ‘men of [righteousness](#)’ were able to achieve a transformation into the likeness of the divine Glory” (Murray-Jones 1992, 20; on this idea of transformation and apotheosis, see also J. J. Collins; cf. [3 Enoch 3–15](#)). The Slavonic Apocalypse of [Enoch](#) ([2 Enoch](#); no consensus on date, but probably stemming back to the late first century A.D. in part) contains a number of similarities to [3 Enoch](#), which belongs among the *Hekhalot* texts. [Enoch](#) travels through seven heavens—a motif that is fundamental to the later Merkabah texts—to the throne of God, where he is transformed and instructed in matters of nature and [creation](#) (*Maaseh Bereshit*).

Likewise the [Testament of Levi 2:6–5:3](#) in its portrayal of Levi’s ascent to the “throne of [glory](#)” and in several details of that narrative runs parallel to the later Merkabah texts. [Ascension of Isaiah 6–11](#) (probably a Christian composition dating to the second century), [Apocalypse of Abraham 15–29](#) (the basic edition probably stemming back to the late first century A.D.), *Life of Adam and Eve* ([Latin] 25–29, [Greek] 31–40, original composition dated to end of first century A.D.), *3 Baruch* (original Jewish work dated to the first and second centuries A.D.), [Testament of Abraham 10](#) (c. A.D. 100), and [Testament of](#) Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).



[Job 48–50](#) (original dating to the first century B.C., but [46–53](#) may be a Montanist addition) all contain a significant amount of material similar to that in the later texts of Merkabah [mysticism](#). There is enough here to justify the claim that ideas of ascent to [heaven](#) involving themes important to the later Merkabah speculation were current already in the late first century A.D. within apocalypticism.

Some of the general differences between these apocalyptic texts and the later Merkabah speculation in the *Hekhalot* texts are enumerated by Alexander (235). He mentions a different ethos, namely, a concentration on the mysteries of [heaven](#) and a description of God’s throne in the Merkabah texts contrasted with the [eschatological](#) themes ([last judgment](#), [resurrection](#), messianic kingdom, world to come) that are so important in the earlier apocalyptic texts. The difference is one of emphasis, but the contrast is marked. Likewise [cosmology](#) is given more attention in apocalyptic than in classic Merkabah texts. Alexander notes also that the theurgic element with its focus on preparation and techniques for ascent is much more pronounced in the later Merkabah texts, though again it is not missing in apocalyptic. Additionally, “the familiar pattern of ascent through a numbered series of heavens, usually seven, is not attested in [Judaism](#) before the Christian era” (J. J. Collins, 46). The [tradition](#) of seven heavens itself is basic in the *Hekhalot* texts, but it cannot be confirmed earlier than the first century A.D. (Aune, 279, 317–19; cf. A. Y. Collins).

Notwithstanding such differences, C. R. A. Morray-Jones affirms the essential unity of the apocalyptic traditions and the *Hekhalot* writings. It is merely a matter of one mystical [tradition](#) giving rise to two [genres](#) of literature: the apocalypse, which functions as a descriptive narrative, subordinating the description of the heavenly vision to the writer’s [didactic](#) purpose, and the *Hekhalot* writings, which serve as technical guides for mystics (Morray-Jones 1992, 24; see [2.2.6](#) below).

2.2.3. [Qumran](#). That most of our present book of [1 Enoch](#) (excluding [37–71](#), the Similitudes) predated the [Qumran](#) settlement and that the sect had an interest in this work in general is evidenced by the Aramaic fragments found at [Qumran](#). Among these are fragments of the ascent passage of [1 Enoch 14](#) as well as the allusion to the throne of God in [1 Enoch 18:8](#) (Schiffman, [353–54](#)). Likewise, among the Aramaic fragments of the *Testament of Levi* there is preserved at least one text giving an account of Levi’s ascent ([4Q213 \[TLevi<sup>a</sup> ar\] 1 ii 11–18](#); cf. A. Y. Collins, 62–66).

An interest in elements that would later feature in the *Hekhalot* texts is more specifically evidenced by several types of texts. The work called *Pseudo-Ezekiel* contains a treatment of Ezekiel’s vision of the divine throne-chariot ([4Q385 4](#)), which is noteworthy as the oldest [extant](#) example of [exegesis](#) of [Ezekiel 1](#), set apart from [1 Enoch 14](#) and similar texts by its explicit and intentional reworking of the biblical text (Dimant and Strugnell). D. Dimant and J. Strugnell observe that there does not appear to be anything sectarian about this text, which permits the supposition that this kind of interest in [Ezekiel 1](#) was not necessarily unique to the [Qumran](#) sect. Also sharing an interest in the “chariots of your [glory](#)” is [4Q286](#) (cf. also [4Q287](#)).

Among the *Festival Prayers* fragments is a text that connects the renewal of the [covenant](#) with “the vision of your [glory](#),” though the meaning and significance of this brief allusion is not clear ([4Q509 97–98](#)

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[i 7–8](#); cf. Schiffman, [355](#), for one view, though his translation differs from some others). Additionally, several passages in the scrolls express an important [belief](#) that the community experienced [communion](#) with the angelic hosts (for this see Dunn 1996, [171–87](#); Newsom, 1–83, esp. 59–72; cf. esp. [1QSa 2:8–9](#); [4QFI or 1:2–5](#); [CD 15:15–17](#); [4QCD<sup>b</sup>](#); [1QM 7:4–6](#); [1QH 3:21–23](#); [11:10–13](#), [25](#); [1QS 11:7–8](#); [1QSB 3:25–26](#); [4:24–26](#); see [Book of Blessings](#); [Damascus Document](#); [Rule of the Congregation](#); [Thanksgiving Hymns](#)). Some of the last mentioned texts look to the last days, and some focus on the experience of the priests in particular, but there is a sense in which the [holiness](#) of the entire community, all of which is priestly in an extended sense, is defined by the presence of the [angels](#) in the present. “Life in the community becomes in some sense priestly service before God shared with the [angels](#)” (Newsom, 63).

None of these strands of evidence gives a clear indication of the practice of mystical ascent by individuals. In contrast, [4Q491 \[4QM<sup>a</sup>\] 11 i 8–24](#) evidently records the claims of a teacher within the community (probably not the Teacher of Righteousness) to have undergone [deification](#) through enthronement in [heaven](#). The text gives no description of [heaven](#) or of an ascent, but it might be an adaptation of traditions found in Ezekiel the Tragedian’s *Exagoge* 68–89 concerning the enthronement and [deification](#) of Moses (on which see J. J. Collins). The latter text is identified by Collins as the only “scene of heavenly enthronement in pre-Christian [Judaism](#) that is not, or is not necessarily, eschatological” (50).

The most important group of texts relating to the themes of the Merkabah are the [Songs](#) of the Sabbath Sacrifice (see esp. Newsom). The *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, also called the *Angelic Liturgy*, is a partial reconstruction of a liturgical text using [4Q400–407](#), [11Q17 \(11QShirShabb\)](#) and a fragment of the same work that was found at Masada (Masada ShirShabb). The major critical edition and study of this text is by C. A. Newsom, upon whose work (esp. Newsom, 1–83) the following comments are based. The text appears to have been written by and for the [Qumran](#) sect as a sequence of thirteen [sabbath](#) day readings, specifically for the first quarter of the year. Of present interest are the numerous parallels between these songs and the later *Hekhalot* texts, not least in the strong reliance on Ezekiel’s vision of the Merkabah in [Ezekiel 1](#) and [10](#), as well as other parts of Ezekiel (esp. [Ezek 40–48](#)). Much of the text focuses on descriptions of the angelic praise of God toward the end of fostering a type of “communal [mysticism](#).” This is accomplished by means of a lengthy period of “preparation” (songs 1–8, though it must be remembered that the recitation of the respective songs is separated by intervals of a week) followed by what can be called a “temple tour” (Newsom, 19). The description of the Merkabah itself runs in part as follows (the following is taken from the penultimate song):

The cherubim lie prostrate before him, and bless when they rise. The voice of a divine silence is heard, and there is the uproar of excitement when they raise their wings, the voice of a divine silence. They bless the image of the throne-chariot (which is) above the vault of the cherubim, and they sing [the splen]dour of the shining vault (which is) beneath the seat of his [glory](#). And when the *ofanim* move forward, the holy [angels](#) go back; they emerge among the glorious wheels with the likeness of fire, the spirits of the holy of holies. Around them, the likeness of a stream of fire like electrum, and a luminous substance with glorious colours, wonderfully intermingled, brightly

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combined. The spirits of the living gods move constantly with the [glory](#) of the wonderful chariots. ([4Q405 20–21–22:7–11](#); García Martínez, 429)

It is intriguing that in this same community apocalyptic works containing accounts of ascents to [heaven](#) (e.g., [1 Enoch 14](#)) are apparently being read, even if the songs differ from the latter in that the songs function as acts of [worship](#) (Newsom, esp. 59, 65). There are interests in these songs that will later be shared by the Merkabah mystics, and with the discovery of a fragment of this collection of texts at Masada we may justifiably imagine that precisely these texts or tendencies fed into the later speculation.

Yet there are distinctive features of the songs that are important to note. While these songs may indicate a kind of [mysticism](#) relating to the vision of the divine throne, it is not the individual [mysticism](#) characteristic of the *Hekalot* texts. It is impossible to say what individuals participating in the liturgical readings might have “experienced” as individuals, but the texts appear to be directed toward a communal experience of being in God’s presence “with the perpetual host and the [everlasting] spirits ... and with those who know in a community of jubilation” ([1QH 11:13–14](#); García Martínez, 353). It is questionable whether the idea of ascent is relevant in such a setting, if that word is being used in the sense of the later mystical practices. In addition, it might be of significance that the vision of the chariot-throne does not form the goal of the composition. Rather, the sequence of songs culminates in song 13 with a brief description of the heavenly sacrificial service followed by a lengthy description of the vestments of the high-priestly [angels](#) who offer the [sacrifice](#). There does not appear to be an idea of coparticipation in the heavenly [cult](#) itself nor a common recitation of a liturgical formula with the [angels](#). The purpose of these liturgical readings was rather the attempt to mount a “literary or rhetorical argument for the legitimation, idealization, or [glorification](#)” of the sect’s priesthood, a literary function that is paralleled in [Zechariah 3](#), *Jubilees* (esp. [Jub. 31:13–14](#); [2:17–19](#), [21](#); [6:18](#); [15:26–27](#)) and the *Apocryphon of Levi*, all of which were known to the [Qumran](#) community (Newsom, 67–72).

There are parallels between the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* and the later Merkabah texts (see Newsom, 237, 314, 329, and elsewhere). But there are also differences, and the extent to which the songs indicate interests (in this particular form) cherished outside of [Qumran](#) earlier than A.D. 70 is not yet clear.

2.2.4. *New Testament*. Several NT texts or ideas are currently being explained with reference to Merkabah [mysticism](#) (see [3](#) below). Two texts, however, stand out as the only firsthand autobiographical accounts of ascent to [heaven](#) in all the earliest Jewish and Christian literature, namely, [2 Corinthians 12:2–4](#) and [Revelation 4](#). Another might be Akiba’s account of his ascent, if the reconstruction of that [tradition](#) noted below (see [2.2.5](#)) is correct.

2.2.4.1. [2 Corinthians 12](#). It is not clear why Paul would bring up “visions and revelations” and discuss the [topic](#) as he does unless he felt compelled to do so. The probable occasion for his doing so would be an appeal to such experiences by his opponents ([2 Cor 11:5](#) et passim) as a part of their attempt to authenticate their ministerial claims, although what they claimed to derive from their visions

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is not evident from 2 Corinthians. Paul had appealed to his vision of Christ as a credential of apostleship (e.g., [1 Cor 9:1](#)), and Luke records a vision in connection with Paul's original Corinthian ministry ([Acts 18:9–10](#)).

Paul mentions neither of these in [2 Corinthians 12](#) but instead cites an experience dating well before his work in Corinth and seemingly takes pains to downplay its significance for the issue of apostolic credentials. Positioned at the climax of his "fool's speech" ([2 Cor 11:1–12:13](#)) the whole account of his ascent rapidly bypasses any hint of positive benefit in order to focus on the lesson learned through the "thorn" in his flesh: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" ([2 Cor 12:9](#) NIV). On the latter lesson the argument of the epistle (assumed in this article to be unified) pivots, and by that argument the appeal to "visions and revelations" is neutralized. Without denying the reality of such experiences in general or diminishing their God-giveness, Paul rejects any suggestion that they authenticate new [covenant](#) ministry.

That being the thrust of Paul's argument in [2 Corinthians 12](#) it is difficult to accept that he is pointing the attention of the Corinthians to an experience, Merkabah or otherwise, that was foundational and formative for his apostleship (as argued esp. by Morray-Jones 1993, who associates [2 Cor 12](#) with [Acts 22:17–18](#)). Nothing here suggests that as of the writing of 2 Corinthians Paul would routinely pursue or promote such experiences, and much suggests that he would now transfer what was thought to be of value in them to another type of experience: turning to the Spirit ([2 Cor 3:7–18](#)).

Not only does he not report anything seen or heard during his journey, but Paul also stresses that nothing reportable resulted. Without denigrating the speech heard in paradise ([2 Cor 12:4](#)) he probably means to suggest that the experience was of little or no pastoral benefit (cf. [1 Cor 14:18–19](#)). It has been suggested that the thorn ([2 Cor 12:7](#)) may correspond to the perils [tradition](#) assigned to Merkabah ascents through the seven (versus Paul's three) heavens and *Hekhalot*, but it is not clear that the thorn resulted from the particular ascent narrated (note the plural used in [2 Cor 12:7](#): "revelations") or that it was inflicted in the course of any ascent. What we know is that the thorn was associated by Paul with his visions and revelations and it functioned as a watershed in his Christian missiology: the prayers of [2 Corinthians 12:8](#) and the declarations of [2 Corinthians 12:10](#) represent the two sides of that watershed. As for the connection with [Acts 22:17–18](#), this depends on treating [2 Corinthians 10–13](#) as a separate letter dating to just before the Jerusalem council of [Acts 15](#) and a generally negative evaluation of Acts' historical reliability touching the chronology of Paul's ministry.

It is apparent that Paul had had mystical experiences ([2 Cor 12:1–10](#) among them; cf. [Acts 9:3–9](#), [12:16:9–10](#); [18:9–10](#); [22:17–21](#); [23:11](#); [26:19](#); [27:23–24](#); [Gal 1:12](#); [2:1](#); as did other Christians, e.g., Ananias [[Acts 9:10–16](#)], Peter [[Acts 10:9–16](#)] and the Seer of Revelation) and he valued them as "surpassingly great," but of greater benefit to the churches and of greater relevance to the subject of authentic new [covenant](#) apostleship was the [revelation](#) of the thorn. The attempt to correlate details of Paul's account in [2 Corinthians 12](#) with the Merkabah traditions are strained but possible. It could be that Paul had earlier practiced a kind of [mysticism](#) such as we encounter in these traditions—this might explain the

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various parallels between his writings in general and the Merkabah texts—but that the experience of the thorn had effected the shift in evaluation that he now encourages the Corinthians to accept.

2.2.4.2. *Revelation*. According to the analysis of D. E. Aune, most of the book of Revelation consists of a “single extended vision narrative” ([Rev 1:9–22:9](#)), within which [Revelation 4:1–2a](#) introduces a new phase, “The Disclosure of God’s Eschatological Plan” ([Rev 4:1–22:9](#)). The heavenly journey of [Revelation 4:1–2a](#) serves as an introduction to both the seal narrative of [Revelation 4:2b–6:17](#) and [Revelation 4:2b–22:9](#). Formally, [Revelation 4:1–6:17](#) is labeled a “literary throne scene, i.e., the primarily literary use of the throne vision is as a vehicle for commenting on earthly events in the narrative” (Aune, [278](#)). The accounts of the divine throne room ([Rev 4:1–5:14](#); [8:2–5](#); [15:1–8](#)) establish the *sovereignty* of God over the events unfolding on earth. Within [Revelation 4–6](#) we are given a depiction of the heavenly *worship* of God ([Rev 4:2b–11](#)) and the investiture of the Lamb ([Rev 5:1–14](#)).

In [Revelation 4:1–2a](#) God opens the door of *heaven* (cf. [1 Enoch 14:14b–15, 18–25](#)) and a voice identified as the angelic voice of [Revelation 1:10–11](#) summons the Seer to *heaven* so that he might be shown “what must happen after these things” (cf. [Dan 2:29](#)). Immediately the Seer falls into a “prophetic trance” (Aune, [82–83, 283–84](#); cf. [Rev 1:10](#); [17:3](#); [21:10](#); and also [Acts 10:10](#); [11:5](#); [22:17](#)), designating an experience that took place “in the spirit” rather than “in the body.” Ritual preparations that might have attended this experience go unmentioned, if there were any. The journey itself, which involves one rather than seven heavens, passes undescribed; the Seer is immediately in the throne room. The vision that follows verbally recalls the OT passages of [Ezekiel 1](#); [10](#); [Isaiah 6](#); [Daniel 7](#) and [1 Kings 22:19](#) and parallels features found in some of the other literature surveyed in this article (e.g., cf. [Rev 4:3b](#) with [Ezek 1:27–28](#) and [4Q405 20–21-22:10–11](#); on the same verse see [1 Enoch 71:6–8](#); [3 Enoch 33:1–34:2](#); see further Aune, [279–374](#)). In contrast to Ezekiel this account does not attempt to describe God.

Thus this passage contains both similarities and dissimilarities to the various sources of information about Merkabah *mysticism*, and it contains unique elements as well (Aune, [278–79](#)). More study is needed before we can say that this account is either *borrowing* from or contrasting itself with a movement or set of traditions continuous with what we encounter in the later *Hekhalot* texts, nor can we say whether this text records a unique experience within the Christian circles associated with this book. Some scholars deny that this text is the voice of experience; it is rather a literary construct *borrowing* from a variety of traditions, including the Merkabah traditions.

2.2.5. *Rabbinic Literature*. A variety of rabbinic texts are brought into consideration by those investigating the roots of Jewish *mysticism* (see, e.g., Scholem 1965 and 1974, 373–74, and the articles by Morray-Jones). A significant passage is [b. Hag. 11b–16a](#) (cf. [y. Hag. 2](#); [b. Šabb. 80b](#)), which supplies a lengthy discussion of the seven heavens (*Maaseh Bereshit*), discusses *Maaseh Merkabah* and passes on stories of famous individuals associated with these teachings. Yet in these and other texts there are hints at the existence of esoteric traditions in the background. Of central interest is a story of four who ascended to paradise in *heaven*, which the *Tosefta* and both Talmuds attach to a restriction articulated in the Mishnah at [m. Hag. 2:1](#) (for related restrictions, see [b. Šabb. 80b](#); [y. Hag. 77a.46](#); [b. Hag. 13a](#)).

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[M. Hag. 2:1](#) reads: “They do not expound upon the laws of prohibited relationships [[Lev 18](#)] before three persons, the works of [creation](#) [[Gen 1](#)] before two, or the chariot [[Ezek 1](#)] before one, unless he was a sage and understands of his own [knowledge](#). Whoever reflects upon four things would have been better off had he not been born: what is above, what is below, what is before, and what is beyond. And whoever has no concern for the [glory](#) of his Maker—would have been better off had he not been born” (Neusner, 330).

It is argued that this Mishnah assumes the currency of *Maaseh Bereshit* (works of [creation](#)) and *Maaseh Merkabah* (the chariot), and while it issues stern warnings in connection with the public exposition of these portions of Scripture it includes such exposition within the fold of rabbinic [orthodoxy](#). In the [judgment](#) of Morray-Jones the first sentence of the above translation “originally meant that no individual (or ascetic) was competent to expound (that is, teach about, or express an opinion concerning) Ezekiel’s vision unless he was a mantic sage [such as Daniel] who could do so on the basis of his own visionary-mystical experience and esoteric [knowledge](#)” (Morray-Jones 1993, 188). This part of the [paragraph](#) derived from the pre-first century A.D. apocalyptic [tradition](#) and was modified when taken up into rabbinism. The last two sentences are additions that represent a later strand of opinion “that was hostile toward the esoteric and mystical traditions, especially as it was developed in circles outside rabbinic control” (Morray-Jones 1993, 190), including Christians and Gnostics.

The [Tosefta](#) and both Talmuds attach to [m. Hag. 2:1](#) the above-mentioned story of four who went into paradise during life, only one of whom made the round-trip journey “in peace” ([t. Hag. 2:1–4](#); [y. Hag. 77b](#); [b. Hag. 14b–15b](#)). This story is also contained in *Song of Songs Rabbah* (*Cant. Rab.* 1:28 [= 1:4:1]) and in two *Hekhalot* texts (*Hekhalot Zutarti* and *Merkabah Rabbah*). A translation of these texts is supplied by Morray-Jones (1993, 196–98, 210–15). It is possible to interpret this story as originally nonmystical, understanding it, for example, as an [allegory](#) of four types of rabbinic scholarship (for some of these alternatives with their principal representatives, see Morray-Jones 1993, 192–93; Halperin’s view would fit here). Several scholars, however, take the view that this story is an ancient (early third century A.D. or earlier) witness to the practice of mystical ascents to paradise and that the story’s association of this type of practice with Akiba (late first and early second century A.D.) is not unlikely.

The sources mentioned in the preceding [paragraph](#) represent different versions of the story, and a reconstruction of an earliest version appears to be less than straightforward. One possibility (argued by Morray-Jones 1993) is that the *Hekhalot* texts, though later, contain an earlier version of the story. This was a first-person account of Akiba’s ascent in the face of angelic opposition to the heavenly holy of holies to behold the [glory](#) of God on the Merkabah. This version left the other three men unnamed and attributed Akiba’s success (versus their failure) to the merit of his deeds. This story was later adapted as an illustration of the Mishnah’s restriction ([m. Hag. 2:1](#)), which by that time had come to be interpreted as saying that only an ordained rabbi could become involved in *Maaseh Merkabah*. Therefore the previously unnamed three were assigned identities of famous but unordained teachers. According to Morray-Jones, this [tradition](#), going back to its earliest form, is continuous with apocalyptic and mystical traditions predating the first century (assuming continuity with texts such as [1 Enoch 14](#)).

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Key issues here are the related problems of the interpretation of individual texts and the reconstruction of the history of the hypothetical traditions. The same must be said for the further attempt to trace through the rabbinic literature the experience of transformation into [angels](#) that certain practitioners of ascents were said to undergo (see esp. Morray-Jones 1992). The transformation of [Enoch](#) has already been noted ([1 Enoch 70–71](#)), and another early text important to the case for the pre-Christian origins of the transformation motif is Ezekiel the Tragedian's *Exagoge* (second century B.C.; cf. Segal, 102; J. J. Collins, 50–53). Possibly [4Q491 \(4QM<sup>a</sup>\) 11](#), noted above, confirms its early origins as well. According to A. Segal, “there is adequate evidence ... that many Jewish mystics and apocalypticists sensed a relationship between the heavenly figure on the throne and important figures in the life of their community. The roots of this [tradition](#) are pre-Christian” (Segal, 107–8, for whom the NT itself evidences the antiquity of this [tradition](#)).

Likewise, Morray-Jones (1992, 26) summarizes a review of several relevant texts by noting that the story of [Enoch](#)'s transformation “may represent the ultimate aspiration of the Merkabah mystic.” The evidence suggests “that a variety of mythical and historical figures were credited with having achieved such a transformation on what might be called a ‘cosmic’ scale and with having become veritable incarnations of the Name or Power of God. An analogous, though lesser, transformation was promised to the righteous in the world to come. But it seems that such a transformation was also considered possible, if only temporarily, for exceptionally holy individuals in this life. Such men were gifted with supernatural power and [knowledge](#), and became intercessors between the divine and human worlds, because they had been conformed to the divine Image or *kābôd* and, like the High Priest in the Temple sanctuary, had been vested with the Name of God.” Note that the experience of mystical transformation is a foretaste of the final transformation of the righteous and the benefits to the mystic.

Assuming an essential continuity between apocalyptic texts such as [1 Enoch 14](#) and the later *Hekhalot* writings, Morray-Jones (1992, 1) argues that the mystical aspirations mentioned “were inherited from apocalyptic circles and enthusiastically developed by some [Tannaim](#), but were opposed by others, mainly because the same traditions were being developed by groups whom they regarded as heretical, including the various forms of Christianity and [Gnosticism](#). The *Hekhalot* writings represent the development of these traditions within rabbinism.” Thus the negative tone of certain rabbinic texts with respect to mystical beliefs and practices, some of which are related to the Two-Power [heresy](#) (e.g., [b. Sukk. 45b](#); [b. Sanh. 63a](#); *Ex. Rab.* 43:3; [b. Hag. 15a](#); [m. Meg. 4:10](#); [b. Hag. 13a](#); cf. [3 Enoch 16](#)) represents only one viewpoint from within rabbinism while those very texts attest the currency of these traditions.

In sum, it is possible to make a case from the rabbinic literature for the existence of mystical- visionary beliefs and practices within first-century [Judaism](#), beliefs that are essentially continuous with those later expressed in the *Hekhalot* texts. Confirmation of this hypothesis would open the way for a fresh reading of several NT texts, as some scholars have already proposed. To return to 2 Corinthians, Paul's description of the process of [glorification](#) associated with seeing God in [2 Corinthians 3:7–18](#) coupled with the evident claim to [authority](#) made by his opponents based on their “visions and

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revelations” ([2 Cor 12:1–6](#))—to mention just two important features—might seem to some to be most at home in this matrix of reconstructed [mysticism](#). The way is then opened to read a number of other details scattered about the NT along the same lines.

2.2.6. *The Hekhalot Literature*. On the whole, these writings have been described as technical guides or manuals for mystics that give little space to narrative descriptions of ascent or the transformation of the mystic (see [2.2.2](#) above). The exception to this rule is [3 Enoch](#), which is a fairly late product of the same mystical-visionary movement but which is itself an apocalypse.

Viewing the texts of Jewish [mysticism](#) collectively (not restricted to the *Hekhalot* texts), one is confronted with “a religious phenomenon that is contained in hundreds of books and in thousands of manuscripts, many of which are still unpublished” (Gruenwald 1995, 6), and fewer of which have been translated (for a list of published texts and translations relating to Merkabah [mysticism](#), see Morray-Jones 1993). Scholem characterizes the *Hekhalot* sources as follows: “All our material is in the form of brief tracts, or scattered fragments of varying lengths from what may have been voluminous works; in addition there is a good deal of almost shapeless literary raw material” (Scholem 1954, 44–45). He enumerates eight of the most important *Hekhalot* texts (Scholem 1965, 5–7), giving special mention to the *Lesser Hekhalot*, the *Greater Hekhalot* and [3 Enoch](#). The dating of the material is difficult, but the “outstanding documents of the movement appear to have been edited in the fifth and sixth centuries” (Scholem 1954, 44). The relative inaccessibility of this literature, the lack of a consensus among specialists regarding the origins and dates of the traditions and literary strata and dispute over whether there is one text behind the various [extant](#) manuscripts has hindered work with this material by NT scholars. Further, “as a matter of general rule and practice, [mysticism](#) is a highly and densely encoded domain. No justice can be done to it by simply translating mystical texts ... from one language into another, particularly when those translations are made by people who know more about the language than about the ‘inner grammar’ that is used in mystical formations” (Gruenwald 1995, 29).

A fuller account of the profile of the [mysticism](#) encountered in this literature has already been given. And as has already been stated, the key question for those interested in NT background concerns the measure of continuity one can assume between the [mysticism](#) encountered in these *Hekhalot* materials and any [mysticism](#) that some scholars detect in the other and largely earlier strands of literature surveyed here. Components of the *Hekhalot* traditions had very early origins, but the question of the continuity of a movement, not unlike questions relating to the history of [Gnosticism](#), has not yet received a firm answer.

### 3. Mysticism and the New Testament

[Second Corinthians 12](#) (along with [2 Cor 3:7–18](#); [4:4–6](#)) and [Revelation 4](#) have already been noted as NT texts that have received attention in connection with Merkabah [mysticism](#). In addition to these a number of other NT texts and ideas have been brought into this discussion in the literature, on which see the works mentioned in the bibliography and standard commentaries. In particular, the exaltation of Jesus in a variety of NT texts is paralleled with the transformation of [Enoch](#) and his identification with Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).



the divine Glory. In addition to [2 Corinthians 12](#), Paul's experience on the Damascus road has been viewed in this light, as well as his language of baptismal transformation (e.g., [Col 3:9–10](#); cf. [Rom 8:29](#); [2 Cor 3:18](#)), his descriptions of the body of Christ (e.g., [Eph 4:12–13](#), which is paralleled with the *Shiur Komah doctrine* and related ideas), his christology (e.g., [Phil 2:9–11](#), noting especially the bestowal of the divine name, the tetragrammaton, YHWH) and the implied idea of a celestial family of [angels](#) in [Ephesians 3:14–15](#) (cf. [3 Enoch 12:5](#); [18:21](#)).

Some scholars have sought to explain the mixture of ideas being confronted in Colossians (esp. [Col 2:16–19](#)) against the background of Merkabah [mysticism](#). If connections like these can be established, others will almost certainly follow, for example, the “snatching up” of the [saints](#) in [1 Thessalonians 4:17](#) (cf. the use of the same verb in [2 Cor 12:2](#) and the idea that mystical ascents were a foretaste of the transformation of the righteous). A recent treatment of Paul's so-called Christ [mysticism](#), by contrast, appears to owe little to the background of Merkabah [mysticism](#) (Dunn 1998, 390–412; see *DPL, Mysticism*). The book of Hebrews has been placed in this context, with emphasis on among other things the importance of its interest in [angels](#), the importance of the throne and the allusions to the heavenly curtain, which is also important in the *Hekhalot* texts. Elements of John's Gospel have also been related to Merkabah [mysticism](#), for example, features of [John 6](#) and [14:1](#) (cf. with the latter [3 Enoch 1:1](#) with its idea of God's heavenly dwellings with their chambers; on the question of John's Gospel, see Kanagaraj). Among other issues in all of this would be the issues of [magic](#) and theurgy, which imbued Merka-bah [mysticism](#), within apostolic Christianity.

While considerable work remains to be done in the area of Jewish [mysticism](#) as background for the NT, enough has been done to show that it could have been current in the apostolic period in some form and that it holds potential for an improved understanding of some NT texts.

See also [HEAVENLY ASCENT IN JEWISH AND PAGAN TRADITIONS; MYSTERIES; SONGS OF THE SABBATH SACRIFICE \(4Q400–407\)](#).

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