Early Jewish mysticism, Jewish apocalyptic and writings of the New Testament—a triangulation

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ABSTRACT
The issue of sources impedes a study of this phenomenon in early Judaism, and therefore also its significance for New Testament writings. Yet it appears that mysticism, particularly as embodied in the merkabah mysticism had quite a widespread influence. Apocalypticism and mysticism are not synonymous. It would appear that merkabah mysticism may have been strongly imbued with apocalyptic thinking. This elicits the interesting question of whether certain Old Testament passages such as Isaiah 6 and chapters from Ezekiel formed a possible interface between apocalyptic and early Jewish mysticism. It cannot be denied that apocalyptic thinking somehow had an influence in the shaping of New Testament writings. This opens up the possibility that early Jewish mysticism could have shaped New Testament thought structures.

1 INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ON JEWISH MYSTICISM
1.1 The phenomenon of mysticism: a possible definition
It was the paradigm of modernism in particular (à la Descartes1 and others) which left us with a heritage that views with suspicion the mystical, or anything remotely associated with it. Mysticism has thus, from a modernistic viewpoint, become and remained a pejorative term.

The well-known Dutch scholar of science of religion, G van der Leeuw, remarked in this connection: ‘No word is deemed with almost such arbitrariness, and in so many ways, as mysticism’ (cf Van Uchelen 1983:7—my translation). One may generally distinguish between a wider and a narrower way of looking at this concept. In a wider sense it simply refers to:

1 We think of his famous dictum: cogito ergo sum— I think therefore I am. Obviously we cannot hold him accountable for all interpretational ills. However, modernism with all the benefits that it brought, left us with a truncated epistemological framework. Having recognised this, one realises that one should not write off any experience or claim to a mystical experience as merely part of a ‘magical world-view’. It was doing exactly this, which left us among others with a ‘modernist’ Apostle Paul.
A belief in, or experience of a reality surpassing normal human understanding or experience; this reality is perceived as essential to the nature of life.

In a more specific or narrow sense it can refer to:

* A system of contemplative prayer and spirituality which is aimed at achieving direct intuitive experience of the divine.\(^2\)

The following elements of a definition could be added:\(^3\):

* The consciousness/experience of union/immediate contact with the Divine or Ground of being/Ultimate Reality.

### 1.2 General characterisation of Jewish mysticism

A difference in the way in which scholars from Judaism and Christianity would respectively study this phenomenon, depends on two factors: (1) whether Christian scholars would view Jewish attempts with suspicion, or whether they would credit the latter with some 'epistemic edge' in this matter; and, (2) whether the sources used by Jewish scholars are deemed to be of an acceptably early dating.

Jewish mysticism comprises both contemplative prayer and spirituality, as well as the achievement of direct intuitive experience of the divine. Jewish mysticism presuppositionally operates from the conviction of experiencing an existent reality of the divine (belief in an epistemic possibility, if you will); and it is also concerned with a *system of practices* which would lead to the experience of God. The latter also refers to *the system of contemplative prayer and spirituality* which is aimed at achieving *direct intuitive experience of the divine*.\(^4\)

Distinctive about the latter in the case of Judaism, is that the beholding of, and the nearness to the Holy One, never leads to an assimilation into, and a being dissolved into the Holy One—the distance between the creature and Creator remains. In spite of the proximity of the Holy One, He is never within tangible reach of the believer; transcendence always remains.

When studying aspects of Judaism, one would generally be inclined to differentiate strictly between more philosophical strands of Judaism and

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\(^2\) There is obviously also the more pejorative sense of *obscure, or even confused belief or thought*, referring to that which is inexplicable, contingent to the notion of the 'mysterious'.

\(^3\) These I borrow from Kourie (1996) who propose that these elements constitute such a definition. To this one could add *‘A working description of Mysticism’* by the Carmodys (1996:10), in which they suggest: ‘direct experience of ultimate reality’ with reference to the work of Bernard McGinn.

\(^4\) This spirituality would also consist of: rules for fasting; other abstinences; purification and bodily postures; regulated study, repetitive and contemplative prayer.
mysticism; Blumenthal (1982) wisely advocates against a divorce of these aspects. Philosophical (Tannaitic) Judaism, the study of the Torah (along with other phenomena such as apocalypticism), is very much the matrix of Jewish mysticism (cf the response by Rodal 1982, in support of Blumenthal’s thesis). The integration of these aspects in Judaism has also been suggested by Baer (cf Dan & Talmage 1982:1–2). It also appears that this integration is of a fairly recent nature and that even Halakhists (who were also Kabbalists) ‘...did not always separate their legal decisions from their mystical inclinations,...’ (Dan & Talmage 1982:2).

Jewish mysticism itself, is clearly rather complex, both historically and phenomenologically. To begin with, one needs to investigate the renowned concept, Kabbalah, which has come to identify Jewish mysticism. This latter concept does indeed refer to Jewish mysticism in general, but it is more than that since ‘...at the same time it is both esotericism and theosophy’ (Scholem 1974a:3). This usage only originated in the circle of Isaac the Blind in the thirteenth century, thus it would be totally anachronistic to call the Jewish mysticism in antiquity Kabbalah. ‘At first the word “kabbalah” did not especially denote a mystical or esoteric tradition. In the Talmud it is used for the extra-Pentateuchal parts of the Bible, and in post-talmudic literature the Oral Law is also called “kabbalah”’ (Scholem 1974a:6).

The general characteristic of Jewish mysticism is indeed that of a culminating experience, in which the mystic would prepare himself by various rituals and abstentions to become worthy to be allowed into the immediate presence of God. Kabbalism assumed two forms, each of these determined by its object of contemplation: the divine chariot in the visions of Ezekiel 1:1-28(ff) contains the principal symbol for the merkabah (or chariot) mysticism. Together with this it was also the hekhalot (palaces) which became the focus of attention, which had to be seen by the mystic as he passed through the various of the seven heavens: thus merkabah and hekhalot were symbols for the same mysticism. The other major focus was the unmediated light of the first day of creation (Gn 1:1–5) which resulted in bereshit or creation mysticism.

1.3 Aspects of Jewish mysticism and definition of terminology
On account of the notion that Jewish mysticism consists of both the major facet of a belief (in an epistemic possibility), as well as a prescribed set of practices, it would be necessary to briefly characterise both.

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5 For more information on this, cf Scholem 1974a:3–7, and the two essays under that title in Encyclopaedia Judaica, 1971.

6 Although some modern authors uses the name Kabbalah for all Jewish mysticism; cf Hauer 1980.
1.3.1 Merkabah mysticism

This is a well-known concept; it refers to the throne chariot upon which God appeared to Ezekiel. Underneath it were the faces of the beings, and it was surrounded by the cherubim and angelic hosts, which in themselves were a privilege to behold.

The very notion of ma'aseh merkabah (the deeds/story of the chariot) indicates a systematisation of traditions within the context of rabbinic Judaism (and extra-rabbinic groups).

1.3.2 Hekhalot

A slightly later (how much later is uncertain) tradition develops the notion of the seven throne rooms (or palaces) of God, the third heaven being equal to Paradise. In this regard Isaiah 6 is of importance, where the notion of הֵדֵל (hence hekhalot) occurs. From this notion we also find the development of the hekhalot visionary tradition, which was a synthesis of a several traditions which are reflected in a number of texts. These traditions were aimed at the achievement of ecstatic trance experiences. According to Rowland (1992:226) such traditions were probably very old.

1.3.3 Bereshit or ‘creation mysticism’

A third facet of Jewish mysticism, may be termed ‘creation mysticism’. Reference is made to the more ‘philosophical quest’ to determine the relationship between the a-material and transcendent Creator and the creation. It was especially Philo who grappled with this facet of mysticism. However, the shi’ur qomah which deals with the dimensions of the body of God also touches upon this facet.

2 EARLY JEWISH MYSTICISM

2.1 Phases of origination

When considered phenomenologically, mysticism could evolve at a certain stage of development in a religion. There would be an initial stage of innocence and naivete where adherents of a religion would spontaneously experience the immediate presence of the deity; this would be followed by institutionalisation which would inevitably bring about alienation and distance from the deity. Then mysticism would follow which would resolve the

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7 In this instance it would be halakhic institutionalisation, which most definitely had its beginnings before the CE.
latter condition by ‘...developing a mode of consciousness through which the believer recovers the direct experience of divine presence’ (Schweid 1985:3).  

One could demarcate four periods of development of Jewish mysticism:  

In ancient Judaism; during the ‘rabbinic’ (i.e. Mishnaic/Talmudic eras); during medieval times, and then of course in modern Judaism. Obviously the mysticism in focus, as it impacted on the formation of New Testament times, is primarily concerned with ancient times; and to some extent also during the Talmudic era, since this is not a phenomenon which began overnight.

Excursus: Van Uchelen (1983:12–22) provides a useful précis of the situation which predisposed the development of Jewish mysticism; not the origination, since its roots stretch back much further. These developments also characterise the mysticism which precipitated these developments. Israel’s religion, as is well-known, was a religion of the temple; the latter being the centre of her religion. The ‘earthly seat’ of Jahweh was in the earthly sanctuary. This sanctuary was a visible sign of the presence of God in Israel’s midst. During the various historical developments, especially after the second temple era,
(the temple having been destroyed), there came a shift of emphasis in which
the focus was now among others on the study of texts, rather than on
sacrifice, or focus on a visible building. The basic foundations of Jewish
society were now removed. From now on, there would be reference to the era
before the destruction and the era after the destruction (as is referred to in
t Ta'anit 3.6). It was now that the Pharisees gained a greater influence, fulfilling
a teaching role in the so-called ‘Oral Torah’. The shekinah was now present
in the bet ha-torah/ha-midrash. It was especially at this time that Johanan
ben Zakkai became a leading figure. In their contemplation of the why of his-
tory they arrived at a different view of The Holy One. It was also now, that
by means of midrash the focus was turned on the heavenly temple, rather
than the earthly. It is for example cited from Genesis Rabba 1,1 that the
Torah and the Throne of Glory was created at the same time. However, it
was at that time that the notion of journeying to the throne of God, in order
to receive disclosed heavenly secrets, was already encountered in apocalyptic
writings. Both the apocalypticist and the mystic traditions which underwent
an accelerated development at this time, found their raison d’être in esoteric
traditions.

The dating of sources is also problematic, as it is not always clear which
sources are of direct and indirect relevance to this matter. Distinctive his-
torical developments in Judaism cannot be regarded as belonging to
watertight compartments (cf the discussion of Daniel 1–14 in Dan & Talmage
1982 and section 1, above).

Although this idea is contested (by Schäfer 1984, and others), Scholem
(1974b:40) postulated the following:

The first phase of Jewish mysticism before its crystallization in the mediaeval Kab-
balah is also the longest. Its literary remains are traceable over a period of almost a

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13 Cf the presentation by Rowland 1992 in which he strongly, and I may add, convincingly argues for evidence of a mystical tradition in rabbinc Judaism.
14 ψττ which entails a searching, a studying and an application of the Scriptures.
15 The question still remains as to which sources in early Judaism are directly applicable to the development and origination of Christianity; i e could historically have influenced the formation of Christianity. Cf my (1995) review of Neusner’s book, Rabbinic literature and the New Testament: What we cannot show we do not know, once again dealing with this aspect. Even though the use of the Talmudic tradition in this issue is tenuous, as well as the dating of the apocalypses, the fact remains that the roots to which these phenomena refer lie much further back than the actual writings.
16 So for instance Van Uchelen, who dates the phenomenon of the rise of merkabah mysticism only within the era of 300–1000 CE. Merkabah mysticism being ‘...de onderneming van een reis of ‘afdaling’ naar de hemelse troon, om daar de Heilige te aanschouwing’ (Van Uchelen 1983:7).
thousand years, from the first century B.C. to the tenth A.D., and some of its important records have survived. [He goes on to argue that it really constitutes one movement, and then he refers to]...its early beginnings in the Period of the Second Temple to its gradual decline and disappearance. [He does admit that concerning]...historical and philological detail much...has not yet been sufficiently clarified. [Of value is his reference to the fact that somewhere in the beginnings of its development there are]...the many pseudepigraphic and apocalyptic works such as the Ethiopic Books of Enoch and the Fourth Book of Ezra, which undoubtedly contain elements of Jewish mystical religion [italics mine].

It is clear from the rest of the discussion (1974b:41–43) that although untraceable, the roots do reach far back, and this is evidenced by the fact that ‘...the main subjects of the later Merkabah mysticism already occupy a central position in this oldest esoteric literature, best represented by the Book of Enoch’ (:43). To characterise what he is referring to he quotes Baldensperger who maintains that:

Not only have the seers perceived the celestial hosts, heaven with its angels, but the whole of this apocalyptic and pseudepigraphic literature is shot through with a chain of new revelations concerning the hidden glory of the great Majesty, its throne, its palace...the celestial spheres towering up over the other, paradise, hell, and the containers of the souls (:43).17

2.2 Passages from the Old Testament

Regarding merkabah mysticism, the most distinguishable early mystical movement reference is usually made to the following passages: Ezekiel 1, 8, 10 (48:8 in LXX); Isaiah 6:1–8. However, reference is also made to other passages where there is mention of the chariot or the throne, or when the form of God appears: 1 Chronicles 28:18; 1 Kings 22:19; Psalm 18:11; Daniel 7:7–10, and others with a kind of apocalyptic narrative. And then to other passages: Genesis 1 (especially on creation with reference to ha’amaseh bereshit) and Song of Songs (with reference to shi’ur qomah or the dimensions of God’s body filling the universe).

Obviously the key passages are those from Ezekiel19, especially Ezekiel 1—the so-called ‘throne chariot (or merkabah) passage.’

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17 The elements referred to here, also found in the Merkabah, might as well have come from the Book of Revelation.
18 This passage speaking about the cherubim covering the ark, also refers to the golden chariot.
19 Much material has been produced on this matter. Two considerable studies are that of Rowland 1974 and Halperin 1988. Rowland traces the influences through to Christian traditions, and is entitled: The influence of the first chapter of Ezekiel on Jewish and early Christian literature. Halperin’s study is entitled The faces of the chariot: Early Jewish responses to Ezekiel’s vision. This substantial work of 610 pages (in the series:
Although much investigation still needs to be done, there have been attempts to find the 'mystical interface in development' between these passages and a more fully fledged (between 300–600 CE) Jewish mysticism. It is obvious that this earlier phase which is the most difficult to construe, is nevertheless the phase that is of most relevance to the study of the New Testament.

Some of the routes to be followed here are via the study of the apocalyptic, apocryphal and Gnostic literature (see note 19 above; and also section 3, below).

2.3 Other sources

Numerous other sources needs to be studied, which I am sure will yield some exciting results for this topic. The following categories mention but a few:

Firstly there are the Tannaitic sources. Obviously on account of their later date, both Mishnaic and Talmudic literature, although relevant, is less directly so. Thus there are the references in the Babylonic Talmud, Hagigah 14b (and parallels and variants in the Tosefta, Hagigah 2.3–4; and the Yerushalmi, Hagigah 2.1, 77a). However, as Rowland (1992:222ff) strongly argues, it is clear even from some Mishnaic evidence that in the ‘...restrictions concerning the study and public reading of Ezekiel 1 go back at least as far as the early first century and may well be much older.’

Other sources are, for example, Ezekiel the Tragedian, and the Ascension of Isaiah. Despite the fact that the latter dates from BCE, Hauer (1980:208) endorses the idea that although the first century of the Christian era and the early decades of the second century supply the earliest evidence of Jewish mysticism, in a form that appears to be on one continuum with Kabbalism, it

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Note 19: Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum, 16), appears to assimilate any possible reference and allusion to Ezekiel’s throne vision, even Revelation chapter 4.

Note 20: The actual roots of the matter stretch further back than the mere first encounter of an idea. Although it may be of little historical significance, it is of note that the four sages referred to in this story, actually played important roles in Pharisaic circles at the beginning of the first century CE. A plausible argument for the paucity of sources on the mystical traditions is: (a) that there may have been some influential rabbis who were against these traditions; and (b) given the esoteric nature of this phenomenon there would also have been a reticence to publicise the most guarded secrets too widely.

Note 21: Which as such is obviously to be dated much later in its formal origins.

Note 22: Some evidence is cited for the suggested early dating. He also refers to the work of Morray-Jones (1987), who argued that the merkabah-restriction originally meant that only a ‘mantic’ wise man who was able to understand the text on the basis of his esoteric knowledge was permitted to ‘expound’ (in the sense of giving teaching about) Ez 1.
does not imply that Jewish mysticism only originated during the first century CE. However, some of the earliest documentation is found in this era.

Hadayot from Qumran and other Qumranic documents: How these fit into the developmental process of Jewish mysticism, is difficult to indicate, since some parts may have played a seminal role in the development of Jewish mysticism, while other sections could have been the product of such developments. Nevertheless, there are clear references in the Hadayot to the perceiving and participation in celestial worship.

For now one further remark will have to suffice. As with other background facets, although written sources may be the only (albeit insufficient) sources, it is imperative that one will presuppose and postulate wider existent traditions which embodied mystical thinking, and work from these as a basis.

3 APOCALYPTIC MYSTICISM OR MYSTIC APOCALYPTICISM?

Some dimensions of apocalypticism do contain mystical facets, and depending on what definition one follows for apocalypticism, mysticism (experience and theory), concurs and overlaps with apocalypticism. That is not to say that apocalyptic seers were mystics in the formal sense, or that mysticism grew directly from the experiences of the apocalyptic seers.

More substantial questions are however: how do these two phenomena relate historically and materially?

During the late Roman Republic, and the era of the early Empire (in the wake of Hellenism; and before that, Iranian influences) one may assume a situation rather conducive for the development of esoteric religions/movements, what with Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, Hermeticism, numerous mystery movements and the like. Geographically, one has the Eastern Mediterranean in mind, where we also find Judaism and later Christianity.

As in the present-day world when trends/spiritual movements are often universal, so also in antiquity, phenomena such as apocalyptic belief and mysticism often seemed to have been universal in their presence. However, in

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23 It is a sine qua non that the phenomenon of apocalyptic is connected to Gnosticism; cf, e.g., Gruenwald 1988. Although this section intends to only touch on the matter of apocalyptic as a phenomenon with a mystical dimension, likewise it is more than probable that Gnosticism is also connected to mysticism.

24 Rowland (1992:213), again reminds that there is widespread recognition that apocalypticism played an important role in the emergence and maintenance of the earliest Christian communities and that it may well have been a more influential force in nascent rabbinic Judaism than has often been allowed.

25 Although there would be some truth in this, the differences are subtle but very real.
the words of Hauer (1980:207) '...distinctive cultural groups tend to express even ubiquitous phenomena in a distinctive way.'

Apocalypticism flourished in both Judaism from about 200 BCE, as well as in Christianity proper, and can be characterised as a highly symbolic and visionary religious expression. Although one can see some form of linear development from the Old Testament scriptures to apocalypticism, it can also be seen differently (e.g. on the basis of such writings as Enoch) that the origin of apocalypticism was a quest for sacred science and speculative ascent experiences. There appears to be agreement on the fact that apocalyptic literature is literature of 'perceived adversity'.

Some kind of connection between apocalypticism and Jewish mysticism has been assumed because of the common features they share.

### 3.1 Historical relatedness

To append a clear time frame to the relatedness in question is impossible. However, from a phenomenological point of view (see the broad definition/s provided under section 1.1, above), in terms of the reciprocal elements contained in these phenomena, it can be assumed that there was never a time when apocalypticism did not contain some elements/traces of the mystical. And in the later developments of mysticism proper, there were often still the traces of an arriving at/or a vision of the divine, in order to obtain some elements of disclosure. Nevertheless, broadly speaking, apocalypticism preceded mysticism proper.

Historically, there is one particular sociological phenomenon which gave rise to the development in Judaism from apocalypticism to mysticism—*cognitive dissonance* (cf Hauer 1980:211ff).

**Excursus:** In the case of Judaism we have several distinct historical moments which would have resulted in this dissonance. Although some of the 'promised deliverance' (by Daniel) did come about, the apocalyptic promise did not come to realisation. This was more acutely so after the first Jewish war of national liberation against Rome. Thus after the events of 70 CE,
Judaism must have found itself in such a state of cognitive dissonance. According to Hauer (:211) it was also at this point that the earlier evidence of organised mystical activity in rabbinic circles can be found. Furthermore, although this order of first apocalypticism, then explicit mysticism may reflect nothing more than the fortunes of literary criticism, it is possible that the development of mysticism in Jewish and early Christian circles (which were still really Jewish) was a response to the failure of apocalyptic hopes. One may offer a psycho-religious reason for this, namely that '[i]nner, personal religious experience is the final redoubt of piety, and mysticism constitutes that more sophisticated extension of direct religious experience' (:211). Faith may endure extensive external disappointment as long as it is reassured by religious experience. It is exactly this truism that comes into play here: 'A direct personal foretaste of deliverance in the form of mystical experience, including...reliving of some apocalyptic visions, could assuage a great deal of doubt....First century Jewish and Christian mysticism would, in these terms, constitute an internalization of apocalyptic' (:211). An important question then is how the insights obtained by mystics were shared by non-mystics in Judaism. Hauer offers the following explanation: The 'non-adepts' in the mystical experience could participate in the foretaste of bliss afforded by the Torah, by devoted observance of the Torah and the Sabbath. Thus at a time when history came to a standstill and the hopes held by traditional apocalypticism became jaded, '...the respective communities would be sustained by anticipatory participation in the future deliverance through mystical, halakhic and/or liturgical means' (:214).

Rowland (1992:225) answers the question of whether it is possible to reconstruct the content of ma'aseh merkabah tradition in the first century with the following: 'In the first place, of course, there is a continuity between apocalyptic, ma'aseh merkabah and Hekalot mysticism. The earliest strata of the talmudic tradition do not talk of heavenly ascent but simply of supernatural phenomena....' I will return to the aspect of historical relatedness in section 3.3, below.

instance Ez 1, set as it is in the Exile and in the aftermath of the previous destruction of the temple, would have been particularly apposite as the rabbis sought to come to terms with the devastation of AD 70.

30 Hauer advances the possibility that in the early Christian communities this becomes evident in those writings which advocate realised eschatology (Gospel of John, Ephesians, and so on).
3.2 Material agreements and disagreements

Broadly speaking, the following can be pointed out as concurring elements:

3.2.1 Similar celestial localities and beings

Both those who were taken up with/in in mystical experiences, as well as those who were privileged to share in apocalyptic revelations, testify of having entered into a hidden world, be it heaven, The Garden of Eden, Gehinnom, Paradise and so on. There they would encounter celestial beings worshipping around the throne of God. Some of these would be special angels, such as Metatron (cf Morray-Jones 1993a). Other concurring features are the Throne and the Glory (Morray-Jones 1993a, 1993b).

3.2.2 Access to those who found themselves in similar states

Both in the case of mystics and in the case of apocalypticists, the respective experiences would usually befall them when they would be praying, worshipping or meditating. Obviously in the case of the apocalypticists, these events would more often be of a serendipitous nature, whereas in the case of the the mystic, the experience may come about as a result of compliance and subjection to certain rigours.

However, having said this, one should point out that both these phenomena/movements would advocate some asceticism. As an example of ascetic tendency in apocalypticism (which one would associate with mysticism), one may refer to the Book of Daniel, where on one occasion Daniel told his friends to seek mercy of God on account of the mystery disclosed to Nebucadnezzar (apparently through earnest prayer; at another time he fasted to gain a vision (Dn 10).

Similarly when it comes to the study of Scripture one would commonly associate the intense study of Scripture with mysticism; but Daniel is intent at obtaining an answer from God concerning his people, after having closely studied Jeremiah (Dn 9).

Although for different reasons, the idea of remaining anonymous, or at most assuming a pseudonym is, at times, very important. In apocalypticism, it is (among others) esoterism which determines this. In the case of mysticism, there is a certain reticence to boast about these experiences.

In both instances the respective disclosure (apocalypticism: for example the future; mysticism: a vision of the Godhead) can come by means of visions.

31 That is, without now entering into much detail or any references.
3.2.3 Distinct difference/s

Broadly speaking one may say that the main difference between apocalypticism and mysticism in Jewish circles was the respective distinctive focus of each aspect: In the case of apocalypticism, the focus resided on future events and insight into the state of affairs of the group or person in question. In mysticism the perceiving of the persons/objects of disclosure were important: the inhabitants in heaven, and God Himself.

As indicated above these differences occurred, on account of a particular historical shift.

3.3 A summary of the common historical relatedness

In a general sense it is clear that they stem from a common religious fund.

It can be inferred that the Scripture passages (cf section 2.2) which make reference to: the merkabah; the throne room/hekalot; the worship by angels; the form of God; mediation by angels; emphasis on the world beyond (not accessible by ordinary means) the kabod (jegara, in Aramaic), and so on, indeed constitute an interface between Jewish mysticism and apocalypticism on account of the reinterpretation and adjustment. That is, when one considers how they have been reinterpreted, or adjusted, or adapted to serve the purpose of the particular focus of mystical objective/desire: to commune with God and to come to a vision of God. However, in the measure that there was also a theosophic objective involved, other less/non-apocalyptic passages were also incorporated. In summary:

- Apocalypticism always contained mystical dimensions. However, its focus was different due to the distinctive religious needs it was addressing, such as insecurity and a deprivation of particular religious identity, due to political and other upheavals. This was evident, for example, during the exilic period, and under the oppression of the Seleucids.

- Mysticism developed to satisfy a different religious quest, and historically originated for different reasons, namely the necessity for a more material religious expression and deprivation of temple worship for different reasons at different junctures in the religious history of Israel. These ‘junctures’ can for example be indicated as the time between the first and the second temple eras.

In all, apocalyptic and Jewish mysticism overlaps, and a reading of both reveals concurring elements.
4 EARLY JEWISH MYSTICAL INFLUENCES AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

4.1 Potential relevance of the study of Jewish mystical elements for New Testament writings

Given the possibilities suggested in the above concerning the developments from the general matrix of Israelite (later Jewish) religion to apocalypticism, and then development to more distinct facets of mysticism, some attention to the possible impact and influence of these developments on the formation of Christian communities, traditions and eventually writings is imperative. Methodologically it will be important to identify those extra-canonical writings which may appear to have relevance. First, they should be studied within their contexts and within certain parameters, and then the New Testament should be re-read again in the light of such study.

As with the study of the relevance of Mishnaic and Talmudic sources for nascent Christianity, so with the study of mysticism: one of the best points of departure may actually be the Christian documents (canonical and other). Thus some of the earliest datable allusions to Jewish mystical motifs are found in Christian sources, for instance, Paul’s autobiographical reference to the man caught up into heaven, which somehow alludes to *merkabah*.

32 The objective is merely to suggest a few possible indications where Jewish mysticism may have either underlaid a New Testament tradition, detected by way of: modification of such an aspect of mysticism; or as an apologetic against it, or even of assimilation.

33 The following two factors have to be kept in mind: (1) that the mystical influences that were somehow assimilated into Christianity could have developed from a Hellenistic interface, which could in turn have been influenced by incipient Gnosticism; furthermore (2) one should be reminded again that nascent Christianity was chiefly a Jewish sect, thus the mystical influences (whether by assimilation; or by their rejection) would have carried distinctly Jewish overtones. Hauer’s (1980:215) remark is apposite in this regard: ‘...early Christian mysticism is at least as likely to be continuous with Kabbalism as Hellenistic mystical models, though in due course it became thoroughly Hellenized.’

34 To mis/use the convenient theological concept, the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the original setting should be construed. What could the effect of a particular text have been, as a text dealing with *mystical dimensions* (and so on)? Attention has to be given to both *formal* and *functional* aspects of such texts. What was the possible effect of a particular text of Paul which also contains such mystical elements? Obviously by this there is no pretense of rediscovering the original intention, or of re-constructing the exact historical setting.

35 Obviously this does involve an unavoidable circular way of reasoning: in order to know what this mysticism was like and in order to identify it in the Christian documents, we need to study some sources on this matter—some of these very sources are the Christian documents.
mysticism, as it echoes the interest in the passages through the levels of heaven. The circle which produced the Gospel of John, supplies in early Christianity an example of mystical interests coupled with allusions to apocalyptic motifs. The Gospel of John, in its prologue (1:1–18), links the Logos with the light of the first day of creation. Light also remains a symbol throughout this book. This may be in reference to bereshit mysticism (cf. Hauer 1980:213). However, this is not the only way in which the mystical tradition underlies the Gospel of John. Hauer (1980:213–214) also argues a case for the possible relevance of mystical traditions to the Book of Revelation. It is here that the aspects of mysticism and apocalypticism would be most clearly be combined.

Of late, renewed attention has also been given to the possible underlying of mystical traditions to Pauline writings (Tabor 1986; Segal 1990; Morray-Jones 1993a, 1993b). This has occurred after the earlier well-known attempts by Albert Schweitzer.

Stegner evidences this renewed interest (1993:508):

Contemporary scholarship is just beginning to explore Paul’s mysticism....Paul’s mysticism is Jewish mysticism and derives from Palestinian Judaism. It must be defined with care. Paul’s mysticism is as well defined by what it is not as by what it is [italics mine].

He points at earlier failures of interpretation when attempts were made to identify Paul with the mystery religions on account of his use of mysterion. He furthermore remarks that the essence of Paul’s mystical thought is not to be decided on the basis of the usages of terms such as ‘Christ mysticism’ (‘in Christ’ and so on),

‘[r]ather, Paul’s mysticism is to be defined by (1) the experience he describes in 2 Corinthians 12:1–4 and (2) his knowledge of God’s eschatological plan (described...in connection with term mystery). In 2 Corinthians 12:1 Paul boasts of “visions and revelations of the Lord.”

Even though some choose to understand 2 Corinthians 12 differently, it is quite probable that the boasting which Paul (by pretence) does not advo-
cate, actually refers to his own experiences: The ‘visions and revelations from the Lord’; ‘being caught up to the third heaven’; ‘caught up into Paradise’, and hearing ‘things that cannot be told, which man may not utter’.39

Nevertheless, by the same token that there is definitely an intertwining of elements between mysticism and apocalypticism, it may be assumed that Pauline writings somehow reflect apocalyptic elements.40 By that same token Paul was influenced by Jewish mystical traditions, even if the latter only existed in incipient form during his time. Aune (1993:31) assumes that there is some concurrence between Paul and those sharing in a mystical tradition, on account of various references in which Paul appears to refer to cognate aspects.41 On account of the close relationship between merkabah mysticism and apocalypticism42 the following could support such a link:

...claims to have been the recipient of revelatory visions or ecstatic experiences (Gal 1:11-17; 1 Cor 9:1; 15:8; see Acts 9:1-9; 16:9; 18:9-10; 22:6-11, 17-21; 26:12-18; 27:23-24). In Galatians he speaks of his Damascus Road experience as an apokalypsis ("revelation"), and in 2 Corinthians he speaks of "visions and revelations [apo]kalyptic] of the Lord,"...

There are several other possibilities when it comes to the Pauline literature that needs to be worked out; either afresh or for the first time.43

39 Stegner (1993:509) argues that the possibility of links with merkabah mysticism is substantiated by the terms used: ἁρπάζω, τρίτος οὐρανός, παράδεισος. He refers to Tabor, who argues a sound case for the fact that this vocabulary belongs to that of Jewish mysticism. Reference is also made by Tabor to the Life of Adam and Eve (25:3).
40 Or maybe even more; namely apocalyptic thought structures. Cf also the fairly recent and very careful (I may add) essay by Aune (1993) in which he wrestles with this issue.
41 Aune, however, does not primarily focus on mystical elements, but on Apocalypticism. His essay contains a subsection called Paul as a Visionary and Mystic in which he expresses these ideas. Nevertheless, this again also points to the intertwinedness between apocalypticism and mysticism as intertwined phenomena in Judaism of antiquity.
42 This in spite of the fact that the former contains more references to out-of-body visions and the latter again bodily ascensions, and in spite of the fact that Paul never wrote an apocalypse himself.
43 Two possibilities come to mind: already almost a decade ago much investigation took place concerning the Colossian heresy as a form of merkabah Judaism. Furthermore, the enigmatic idea of the Body of Christ in Pauline writings may be, somehow, tied up with the idea of the shi’ur qomah traditions.
5 CONCLUSION

The above survey indicates that some aspects could be fruitful to study, with regard to their relevance to the New Testament. It is imperative that one should point out the following.

For those who care to subscribe to the possibility that Jewish influences in Pauline writings have often virtually been denied, many fresh vistas have been opened up (especially since the Paul-and-the-Law-debate); when also subscribing to this possibility—that Paul could have interacted with (both drawn from; and also refuted) Jewish mystical strands. The measure of validity in which this phenomenon played a role in the shaping of Paul and the rest of the New Testament writings, needs to be tested.

Finally, after having cursorily 'traversed' some of the Jewish mystical territory, having given the 'issue of sources' some consideration, and then very briefly looked at some recent discussions of possible mystical background in New Testament 'theological structure', I for one, am convinced that this 'country' needs further exploration, not in order to dismiss the possibilities, but to affirm the probabilities, and to establish how they can really apply.

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