

SCHÄFER'S *SYNOPSIS ZUR HEKHALOT-LITERATUR**

THE HEKHALOT LITERATURE is an anonymous corpus of writings attributed to the second-fifth centuries, which have come down to us primarily through medieval manuscripts and through some fragments from the Cairo genizah. The literature does not contain within itself any clear evidence as to its date of origin, nor does it offer a clear testimony as to the background of the concepts and contentions expressed in it. Consequently the historical and chronological background as well as the religious orientation of those circles from which the hekhalot traditions had sprung remain undefined and indistinct.¹

In recent years the hekhalot literature has attracted widespread attention and renewed scholarly interest, concentrated upon the inherent methodological problems and textual dilemmas as well as upon its historical and phenomenological ramifications. Various scholars have dealt with the problematics of the position of the hekhalot literature in the development of ancient Jewish mysticism, while attempting to trace its intricate historical connection with talmudic literature, the Judean Desert writings, early Christian literature, and various Gnostic trends.² The main problems have been defined, a number of important works have dealt with the history and the phenomenology of the hekhalot literature, and textual difficulties have been emphasized, but every discussion of these traditions is still hampered by severe difficulties and uncertainties of a substantial and technical nature.

The most important extant manuscripts of the hekhalot traditions were transcribed and edited by *ḥaside Ashkenaz* in the beginning of the thirteenth century.

* Peter Schäfer with Margarete Schlüter and Hans Georg von Mutius. *Synopsis zur Hekhalot-Literatur*. (Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum 2.) Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1981. Pp. xxv + 299.

¹ See H. Graetz, *Gnosticismus and Judentum* (Krotoschin, 1846); G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1954), pp. 40-79.

² See G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York, 1960); S. Lieberman, *משנת שיר השירים*, Appendix D in Scholem's *Jewish Gnosticism*, pp. 118-26; J. C. Greenfield, Prolegomenon to H. Odeberg, *Third Enoch* (New York, 1973), pp. xi-xlvii; I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (Leiden and Cologne, 1980); D. Halperin, *The Merkavah in Rabbinic Literature* (New Haven, 1980); I. Gruenwald, "Jewish Sources for the Gnostic Texts from Nag Hamadi," in *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem, 1977) 3:45-56; L. Schiffman, "Merkavah Speculation at Qumran," in *Mystics, Philosophers, and Politicians: Essays in Jewish Intellectual History in Honor of Alexander Altmann* (Durham, North Carolina, 1982), pp. 15-47.

Copies of these manuscripts dating from the fourteenth century are the earliest in our possession. They had thus been transcribed nearly one thousand years after their assumed date of composition, and must therefore reflect late textual recensions. There can be little doubt that in the long period of time between their composition and their transcription profound changes had occurred in the texts, their tradition, order, and edition. These manuscripts cannot be distinctly or consistently divided into identifiable treatises, chapters, or units; furthermore, there are usually no headings to the various parts. Thus the manuscript form of the texts, by its very nature, allows no unequivocal definition of identity, content, nomenclature, and segmentation of what has come to be considered the hekhalot literature.³

The earliest attempts to define distinct sections in the corpus of this literature can be found in the gaonic responsa.⁴ There Hekhalot Rabbati and Hekhalot Zutarti are mentioned for the first time; however, the responsa contain no indication of the extent of the texts or of their literary nature, and fix neither the point of their beginning nor the point of their end. Any attempt therefore to partition the hekhalot corpus into unequivocal sections would be most difficult. Nevertheless, the accepted method in past research has been to divide the major parts of the known material into reasonably clear units, and considerable parts of it have accordingly been published by Jellinek, Wertheimer, Musajoff, and others.⁵ Although these editions have been generally regarded as inadequate, scholars have continued to treat the material according to this principle. Further critical editions of some parts of the corpus were published by Odeberg, Scholem, Gruenwald, Elijor, Cohen, and others.⁶ In recent years this method has been questioned, and scholars have begun to view the manuscripts in a different light.

The indistinct character of the historical background and the doubtful textual identity have brought about a twofold methodological change in the modern research literature: a) a differentiation of the known hekhalot traditions as pluralistic expressions of several circles which represented different religious interests

³ R. Elijor, "Hekhalot Zutarti," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, Supplement 1 (1982): 1-4; P. Schäfer, "Tradition and Redaction in Hekhalot Literature," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 14 (1982): 172-81.

⁴ B. M. Lewin, *Oṣar ha-Geonim*, Ḥagigah, (Jerusalem, 1932), p. 14.

⁵ For a comprehensive list of the available material see G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, pp. 5-8; and I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, pp. 134-217.

⁶ H. Odeberg, *Third Enoch* (Cambridge, 1928; New York 1973²); G. Scholem, "Ma'aseh Merkabah," Appendix C, in *Jewish Gnosticism*, pp. 101-17; I. Gruenwald, "Visions of Ezekiel," *Temirin*, (1972): 101-39; R. Elijor, "Hekhalot Zutarti" (note 3, above); M. S. Cohen, *Shiur Qomah, Texts and Recensions* (Tübingen, 1985).

and spiritual emphases;⁷ b) the accepted view of the existence of individual treatises within the hekhalot literature has been challenged by an attempt to treat the material in its entirety, in its earliest raw form, as a basis for a reconsideration of the entire corpus without preconceptions due to arbitrary or incidental changes effected by later editors, publishers, and scholars.⁸

Peter Schäfer's *Synopsis zur Hekhalot Literatur* is an important contribution to this new approach. He presents synoptically a major portion of the hekhalot corpus—seven manuscripts of major importance—in their original form and sequence disregarding previous editorial conventions, abstaining from preconceived notions as to the nature of the texts and without passing judgment on the content or the order. The manuscripts included are: New York (Jewish Theological Seminary) 8128, Oxford 1531, Munich (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek) 40, Munich 22, Dropsie 436, Vatican 228, and Budapest (Rabbinical Seminary) 238. The synoptic text has been divided into 985 sections, an artificial though useful separation. A brief introduction explains the structure of this edition and offers technical advice on how to utilize the sections. Schäfer's primary editorial principle has been to abstain from any intervention in the transcribed text and to adhere to the original sequence of the manuscripts, while avoiding the previously common division into individual treatises. Consequently Schäfer has abstained from giving or emphasizing titles in the manuscripts, and refrains from correcting or editing the manuscripts in any manner, thereby avoiding any historical or ideological insinuations.

Schäfer's adherence to the editorial principles of presenting the exact sequence of the manuscripts, disregarding previous divisions as well as avoiding prejudgment of the existence of different treatises and of the problems of interrelations of the various parts, must be met with full approval and agreement. Since modern research has recognized the need to review the nature of the hekhalot corpus, this synopsis offers a solid base for further investigation, free from prior editorial intrusions into the texts. However, the reader must bear in mind the fact that the material here published is by no means the entire corpus of the hekhalot literature. Here we have but a selection of the available manuscripts.⁹ Important treatises, such as the so-called Alfa-Beta de-Rabbi Aqiba, the hekhalot portion of Midrash Mishle, the hekhalot portions in the genizah fragments,¹⁰ and hekhalot traditions

⁷ J. Dan, "The Seventy Names of Metatron," in *Proceedings of the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, (Jerusalem 1982), pp. 19–23; idem, "Anafiel, Metatron," *Tarbiz* 52 (1983): 447–57.

⁸ P. Schäfer, "Tradition and Redaction in Hekhalot Literature" (above, note 3), pp. 180ff.

⁹ The Microfilm Institute of the National Library in Jerusalem has a comprehensive list of most of the available manuscripts.

¹⁰ P. Schäfer, *Geniza Fragmente zur Hekhalot Literatur* (Tübingen, 1984).

in midrashic and kabbalistic literature, are absent. Others, such as Seder Rabba de-Bere³shit, are included because they are found in a particular manuscript, although their inclusion in the hekhalot corpus has not been established. Many manuscripts and portions of almost all of them may be cross-referenced in other, parallel, manuscripts and printed sources which may offer important variants. The reader should therefore bear in mind that further textual evidence is available, although often in a much less convenient form. The *Synopsis*, nevertheless, offers a very practical presentation of the major hekhalot traditions in their original manuscript form, emphasizing the inherent editorial difficulties. True, it cannot replace a much needed critical edition of all the various parts which must include the selection of texts and the evaluation of all available material. But the *Synopsis* is not intended to be a critical edition; rather it offers to the scholar the manuscript material required to attempt such a complete critical work.

The guiding editorial consideration—presentation of the original sequence of the manuscripts—is essentially correct, although fault may be found with the total adherence to incidental variations and errors found in the manuscripts. Three major considerations arise in the reading of doubtful words: 1) unknown words which have no parallel; 2) words probably mistranscribed which can be alternatively interpreted; 3) doubtful words in phrases which can be found in traditional sources. The first two kinds of words should be transcribed as they appear, since we have no criteria to select the correct version. The third instance is open to logical appraisal, especially if traditional sources, such as biblical verses, talmudic quotations, or the name of God, are in question.

In the *Synopsis* great importance is attributed to the shape of the characters, based upon the assumption of calligraphic consistency and lack of variation in the form of particular letters, while no attempt is made to confront the meaning of the text. This approach should be treated with reserve. Readers of Hebrew manuscripts are familiar with the objective difficulties in discerning between *bet* and *kaf*, *yod* and *waw*, *samekh* and final *mem*. One is torn between adherence to a presumed calligraphic consistency which can result in meaningless words, and seeking a reasonable meaning based upon known tradition. In my opinion, the author has overstressed his presumption of a consistent calligraphic tradition and commitment to formal character shapes, with the resultant ambiguous readings. This has caused Schäfer to retain obvious errors and misreadings in the texts, with no indication of possible alternative readings.

Schäfer's insistence upon presumed calligraphic consistency, the similarity between certain letters in cursive Hebrew script, and the physical condition of the manuscripts, now nearly five hundred years old, have resulted in sentences such as רבכה דודי צח ואדום דגול מרבכה ראשו כתם פז קצוצותיו תלחלים (*Synop.* 419); רבכה can be alternatively read רבכה, as a quick look at the manuscript will show. Likewise, קצוצותיו is an indubitable error by the fourteenth-century scribe for the biblical קיצותיו. The structure of the *Synopsis* allows no room for such comments or alternative readings, and thus the question of the limits of the modern tran-

scriber's commitment to the continuation of previous transcribers' errors remains unsolved.

Considerable effort has been expended by Schäfer to produce as far as possible a precise and authentic version of the text. However, a sample check of New York manuscript 8128 reveals a number of errors and omissions: *Synop.* §419 reads במשנה, while the manuscript quite clearly has המשנה; *Synop.* §355 reads למדנחה, while the manuscript has למדנחא; *Synop.* §418 drops כבוד which is clearly present in the original manuscript. The number of such errors is actually small considering the size and scope of the work. My main argument with the editor is one of principle: in *Synop.* §376 the name of God is spelled יְהוָה (in the statement מעיד מצידי ישראל (אני עדרת זו ביחודה אלהי ישראל, an obvious scribal error; *Synop.* §364 reads צור עולמים אדני—obviously the correct word is אדני; *Synop.* §355, in a chapter dealing with the holy creatures Schäfer reads אל שרי, while it is clear that the correct reading is שרי אל. The point which should be stressed is not the number of errors due to faulty reading but rather the mistakes which have been allowed to enter the text for overzealous editorial considerations. This editorial inflexibility, which has made no allowance for alternative readings, reasonable correction, or explanatory comments, has brought about meaningless sentences, such as יהיה לצורות שלא יתעה בסימן הזה כסימן הזה יהיה לדורות (Synop. §409), which should be read יהיה לדורות זה אורר, שלא יתעה אדם. . . . ויראה זה אורר זיר, the cursive Ashkenazic צ and ד being easily interchanged. Another example of preference for presumed character shape over meaningful words is found in the cosmological hymn of *Synop.* §367, where פתח פום ימא וסתם מי ריקעא is easily corrected to פתח פוסמא וסתם מי ריקעא, bearing in mind the similarity between the cursive ס and final ס.

We have thus seen that this reliance upon the doubtful criteria of the shape of characters and of calligraphic consistency can prevent us from achieving a reliable and meaningful text. Consequently Schäfer's readings cannot always be accepted as decisive, and one is well advised, if in doubt, to consult the original manuscripts.

Despite these reservations, Schäfer's book is a major contribution in the study of the principal problems touching the hekhalot literature. His comprehensive presentation of the manuscript material opens new ways for reassessment of the various portions and their relation to the entire corpus. The scholar is offered a very convenient and helpful means to become acquainted with these components of the hekhalot literature.