Peter Schäfer is one of the towering figures in the modern study of Jewish mysticism, having developed the important ‘synoptic’ model for presenting the data contained in the various manuscripts of Hekhalot literature (Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981), collaborated with Klaus Herrmann in an important new German translation of these texts (Übersetzung der Hekhalot-Literatur. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), and authored numerous critical and interpretive studies. In The Origins of Jewish Mysticism Schäfer extends his investigation of alleged mystical texts chronologically backwards to the early Rabbinic discussions of the Merkabah, Philo’s account of the ascent of the soul, the texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Jewish and Christian apocalypses, and the prophet Ezekiel. A large part of his motivation in conducting this study is his concern for the conceptual and methodological confusion that has frequently characterized the study of Jewish mysticism. His intent is to avoid sweeping theoretical models and to gloss the sense of ‘origins’ in a deliberately modest fashion: not as ‘an absolute and fixed beginning at a certain place and time but a process’, a process which was not linear but rather ‘a polymorphic web or network of ideas that … manifest themselves in certain practices of individuals as members of certain communities’ (p. 23). There will be no grand theories, no evolutionary models, no comprehensive typologies, no exhaustive phenomenologies. Instead, Schäfer begins with the texts themselves and a set of traditionalist historical-critical questions. Apart from the introduction and the conclusion, the chapters are patient critical expositions of the texts, which situate them in their historical and cultural contexts to the extent possible and which repeatedly attempt to discern the task each text accomplishes for its original readers.

The Introduction sets out the scholarly context in which Schäfer situates his work. As Scholem had already argued, the common handbook definition of mysticism as unio mystico, union with divine reality, simply does not fit what goes on in Jewish mysticism, however that category is defined. Although Scholem attempted to historicize and contextualize the study of Jewish mysticism, his sketch of the three phases of Jewish mysticism (the Jewish apocalypses, merkabah speculation of mishnaic teachers, and the merkabah mysticism of the Hekhalot literature) was never developed and defended. Recent scholarship includes both those who would continue Scholem’s attempt to establish an unbroken continuity (Ithamar Gruenwald, Andrei Orlov, James Davila, Philip Alexander, Rachel Elio, Elliot Wolfson, April DeConick, etc.) and those who are critical of the hypothesis (Martha Himmelfarb, David Halperin, and Peter Schäfer himself). The rest of the book is a demonstration of the significant divergences among the various texts considered and the implausibility of many of the claims made for close continuity among them.

Chapter 1, Ezekiel’s Vision, is largely an exposition of Ezekiel 1, though Schäfer does argue that the details present Ezekiel as ‘the new Moses’ (p. 47) who
demonstrates that God is not bound to the Temple in Jerusalem but that ‘the cosmos is his Temple’ (p. 51), thus addressing the problem of the religious needs of the exiles.

In the following two chapters, devoted to ascent apocalypses Schäfer attempts to identify the actual interests of the texts, arguing that, although the book of the Watchers and the Testament of Levi contain ascent accounts, they are not so much concerned with the ‘individual experience of the visionary’ (p. 64), as they are with the message the seer receives. By contrast, the Similitudes and 2 Enoch are far more focused on the possibility of the transformation of the seer into an angel. Similarly, the Apocalypse of Abraham, Ascension of Isaiah, and Apocalypse of Zephaniah envision angelification and participation in the angelic liturgy for the seer and the righteous dead. The motif of the ‘worthy adept’ (p. 102) and the perils of ascent in Zephaniah has important similarities with later Hekhalot texts.

In Chapter 4 on Qumran Schäfer is less expository and more argumentative, especially concerning the interpretation of the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice. He rejects interpretations of the Sabbath songs as mystical, distancing himself especially from the interpretation of Christopher Morray-Jones, James Davila, and Philip Alexander, all of whom stress the similarities between the Sabbath Songs and later Hekhalot texts. Schäfer’s cautionary arguments are largely persuasive, though I think he underestimates the experiential dimension of the Songs (p. 131, n. 50).

Chapter 5 on Philo presents something of an interlude in the book, since his account of the soul’s journey through the heavenly realm is based on metaphysical assumptions quite different from those of the other texts considered. Yet even here, Schäfer shows that for Philo, though the soul can reach the intelligible world, there is finally no vision of God and certainly no unio mystico.

Schäfer devotes chapters 6 and 7 to a detailed and subtle analysis of the Rabbinic traditions in the Mishnah, Tosefta, Yerushalmi, and Bavli, arguing that they are focused on exegesis of the Torah and do not reflect experiential practices of a mystical sort (contra Elliot Wolfson), though the Bavli includes material that gives the stories ‘a peculiar ‘Merkavah mystical’ tinge’ (p. 241). While most of Schäfer’s analysis is convincing, his determination to find an anti-mystical orientation in the material sometimes causes him to over-interpret the text. How can one determine, for instance, that the Bavli editor introduces descriptive material about the throne of glory ‘almost reluctantly, as if he has been suddenly reminded of something that he would have preferred to ignore’ (p. 224)?

Chapter 8 on The Merkavah Mystics provides a detailed exposition and analysis of the major ‘macroforms’ and ‘microforms’ of the Hekhalot literature, stressing their distinctiveness from one another and the diversity of the component ‘microforms.’ The microforms variously emphasize the status of the mystic and his quasi-messianic role (the Gedullah Hymns and Ten Martyrs Narrative), the heavenly throne ritual and the vision of the garment of God, God’s preference for Israel over the angels (Qedushah hymns), magical seals and adjurations (ascent accounts in Hekhalot Rabbati), etc. What they do not do is to provide a detailed account of a vision of God. Perhaps Schäfer’s most intriguing argument is
that the elevated figure of Metatron in 3 Enoch is less a linear development of the earlier Enochic traditions and more a late Babylonian Jewish response to the Christian exaltation of Jesus Christ.

Chapter 9, Conclusions, summarizes his findings. Although occasionally sounding a somewhat grumpy note, Schäfer is certainly correct in his major conclusion: the Hekhalot literature (and the earlier texts considered) present such a ‘complex web of different, competing, and even conflicting ideas and tendencies that [they] cannot and must not be forced into the Procrustean bed of a harmonizing synthesis’ (p. 339). Schäfer’s historiist and particularist orientation is to be commended. And yet, even if one largely agrees with Schäfer about the virtues of being a ‘splitter’ rather than a ‘lumper’, there is a sense that many of the intriguing similarities among the ascent apocalypses, Qumran texts, rabbinic apocalypses, and Hekhalot microforms have not yet been accounted for. Indeed, at the end of the book one has to consider its title as quite ironic. Schäfer remains deeply ambivalent about the very meaningfulness of the term ‘mysticism’ (pp. 353–55), and he has throughout the work declined to sketch out a framework for origin, even in the guise of complex historical ‘process.’ Schäfer’s masterful work, however, provides an excellent foundation for those scholars who are interested in developing new and more rigorous theories of the cultural transmission and transformation of common elements from Ezekiel to the baroque splendour of the Hekhalot literature.

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Halakhah in the Making is Aharon Shemesh’s second full length book and as with his first work, Sins and Punishments, Shemesh’s strength is in his attention to detail, his fine-tuned analysis of individual halakhot and his ability to paint a broad picture of the legal thought, hermeneutical approach and theology that emerge from these isolated sources. In his current work his stated goal is broader than in his first – he wishes to offer a comprehensive assessment of the history and development of halakhah from the last centuries of the Second Temple period through the beginning of the rabbinic period, concentrating on the two main groups whose halakhot are known to us today: the Dead Sea sect and the rabbis.

In his Introduction Shemesh presents two models to describe the relationship between Qumran writing and rabbinic literature. The first is the ‘developmental’ model – Qumran represents the earlier halakhah/halakhic theory, which later developed into rabbinic thought and halakhah. The second he terms ‘reflective’ – the two systems, proto-rabbinic and Qumranic existed already during the Second Temple. Shemesh’s central claim is that both models are accurate at times, and occasionally even coexist. In other words, in some disputes the rabbinic position which