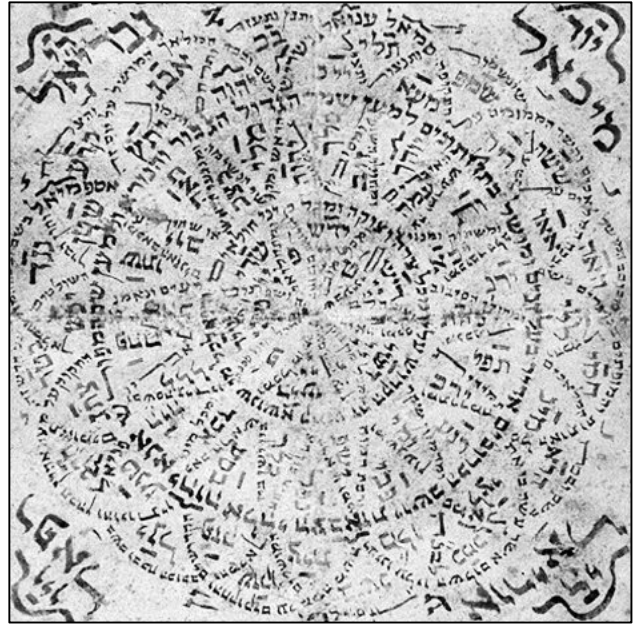


Cosmology, Eschatology, and the Diversity of Late Antique Judaism

- Generally speaking, Rabbinic Judaism is marked by a relative lack of interest in the afterlife and the End of Time, which is akin to the attitude found in the Hebrew Bible but contrasts with Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity.
- In Rabbinic literature, we find ample evidence for a belief in the coming of the Messiah (sometimes two), the Resurrection of the dead in the body (an idea that is, in fact, a key element of Rabbinic identity), the Last Judgment, and the dawning of a new eschatological age. Nevertheless, far less attention is given to the details, and there is a concern that people should not focus too much on such issues to the detriment of the concerns (religious, social, legal, cultural) of the present world.
- As we have seen, early Rabbis seem to have rejected the apocalyptic literature, together with its two key concerns (cosmology and eschatology), its interest in speculating into heavenly secrets and otherworldly realities, and its claim of certainty about even the smallest details of these realities.
- As time went on, however, and as the heart of the Rabbinic movement gradually moved from the Land of Israel to Babylonia, some of these ideas came to be raised once again.

Cosmology in Rabbinic Judaism

- As we have seen, the Mishnah (ca. 200 CE), the foundational document of Rabbinic Judaism, includes attempts to limit human speculation into the structure of the cosmos and into the Chariot (Hebrew: *Merkavah*) of God in the heavens as described by Ezekiel.
- The Babylonian Talmud (ca. 500/600 CE) – an expansive commentary on the Mishnah written and compiled by Rabbinic Jews in Babylonia – upholds these rules in practice, but it also engages in speculation about precisely these topics.
- Specifically, it outlines the different levels of heaven (here, seven!) and the contents of each. Consistent with the Rabbinic concern for ethics, the Talmud gives special attention to the heavenly realms where the righteous souls dwell.
- Interestingly, the Talmud is concerned to outline where souls dwell in the time between death (i.e., separation from the body) and resurrection (i.e., rejoining the body at the End of Time) but also in the period prior to birth on earth (i.e., assuming human souls are preexistent, living prior to their joining with bodies).
- In Rabbinic Midrash and Aggada we find a similar view of the soul as distinct from the body, parted from the body at death, punished or rewarded in the time between personal death and resurrection at the End of Time, and joined again with the body for the Last Judgment.



Aggada: Rabbinic term for non-legal traditions, including exposition of the Hebrew Bible (i.e., Midrash), folkloristic tales about famous Rabbis, and so on.

Midrash: Rabbinic Jewish biblical interpretation, as characterized by the creative and open-ended use of a variety of interpretative methods and the celebration of multiple meanings in Scripture (whose every word and letter are seen to be significant and which is held to have more than one meaning at the same time, precisely because of the Bible's divine status). The term "midrash" can mean a text that collects these traditions, and "the Midrash" is often used to refer to the totality of all such traditions.

Babylonian Talmud: Extensive and expansive commentary on the Mishnah (see handout from March 28 for more details). Sometimes, as with the

Hekhalot literature: A set of early Jewish mystical texts (i.e., dating prior to the development of Kabbalah in the Middle Ages)

Heavenly Ascent and the Afterlife in Early Jewish Mysticism

- Around the time of the Talmud and following, we also find the development of an early stream of Jewish mysticism, as now preserved in the Hekhalot literature (named after a Hebrew term for “palaces,” which is here used as a technical term for heavens).
- Although this literature celebrates famous Rabbis (e.g., R. Akiva, R. Ishmael) as mystics and visionaries, many of its ideas and concerns seem to run counter to the typical values of Rabbinic Judaism (esp. its interest in “magic”). Most notably, its concerns seem to fit with those very practices limited by the Mishnah: speculation about the Chariot of God (Maaseh Merkavah) and cosmology (Maaseh Bereshit), as well as “magic” (interests in angels (esp. how to call them down to earth and bind them so that they transmit all their knowledge of the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic law w/o the need for study)).
- This literature includes accounts of the heavenly ascents of famous early Rabbis. This recalls the accounts of the ascents of biblical figures (e.g., Enoch) in Second Temple Jewish apocalypses and accounts of the ascents of apostles (esp. Paul) in early Christian apocalypses.
- Some debt to Second Temple Jewish apocalypses is suggested by the fact that Enoch features within one of these texts (i.e., 3 Enoch). In 3 Enoch, R. Ishmael ascends to heaven and meets the angel Metatron, whom he discovers to be really Enoch transformed into an angel (i.e., as in 2 Enoch). Metatron then teaches R. Ishmael many things, taking him on a tour of the heavens and showing him the places of reward and punishment.
- There are, however, important differences between apocalyptic literature and Hekhalot literature. Here, the ascents are not initiated by God (i.e., it is not a case of rapture = being snatched up into heaven by divine means); rather, they are initiated by the Rabbis themselves, and the texts provide instructions about how to prepare for and achieve such ascent (e.g., prayer, fasting), as well as warnings of the dangers (e.g., angels who guard the entrances to each level of heaven). The goal, in this case, could perhaps be deemed “mystical” inasmuch as the aim is not to learn about the cosmos and divine justice as much as for the visionary himself to reach the highest heaven and God’s Chariot and thus be near to God.