rabbis lived in a mostly urban culture, not a rural family-farm based culture. Hence the perpetuated line ideal was no longer central. Weisberg herself notes this on page 202, but dismisses it as, at best, a secondary concern. Nevertheless, it seems to us that a further and deeper exploration of this possibility would have given the book more explanatory power.

As a whole, Weisberg's book is a useful contribution to the study of levirate and rabbinic conceptions of family. The book is well researched and contains many valuable insights. If the thesis is not fully convincing, it is compelling enough to warrant further research and thought.

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The Origins of Jewish Mysticism, by Peter Schäfer. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009. 398 pp. €99.00.

The Mishnah (Hagigah 2:1) identified a number of topics in the rabbinic curriculum that could not be taught openly, among which the most secret was "the work of the chariot," the *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. It is clear that this esoteric discipline revolves around the extraordinary vision related in the first two chapters of Ezekiel in which the prophet saw a human-like figure enthroned upon a fantastic vehicle that was composed of and drawn by an assortment of supernatural beings. Consistent with the Mishnah's insistence on secrecy—though, to be sure, that was the policy of the school of Rabbi Akiva and was not shared by the school of Rabbi Ishmael—rabbinic literature provides very little actual information about the contents of the *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, and in the talmudic narratives the expositions are accompanied by an aura of supernatural special effects. The issue has been confused considerably by the fact that major schools of medieval Jewish religious thought, including both Maimonides' Aristotelianism and the Kabbalah, claimed to be rooted in the ancient Work of the Chariot. The central question in much of classic academic analysis of rabbinic esotericism was how, if at all, it connected to the late rabbinic or early medieval "Hekhalot" texts that described mystical ascents of pseudepigraphic ancient rabbis through multiple levels of palaces until they were vouchsafed a vision of the divine "chariot." Recent generations of scholars have enriched the discussion with the inclusion of a larger number of relevant texts (especially

the new material from Qumran), a more sophisticated understanding of the redactional and textual complexities of rabbinic literature, better editions of the Hekhalot texts (for which we are especially indebted to Prof. Schäfer), and more nuanced methodological formulations of the religious concepts of mysticism and esotericism. It is therefore most fitting that these issues be addressed again by a scholar with proven mastery of the discipline.

Schäfer's method here generally involves reading each of the relevant primary texts very cautiously with a focus on those features that could define it as "mystical," notably, whether or not it speaks of humans having a close experience or encounter with God. The introductory chapter surveys the more prominent theoretical approaches to defining the category of mysticism and its specific Jewish versions. Schäfer finds flaws in all these theories and does not really offer a definition of his own, opting instead for a pragmatic and flexible approach that would emerge organically from the texts rather than being imposed by scholarly fiat. Allowing the texts to speak for themselves encourages a receptiveness to patterns that were overlooked by previous scholars, such as the "restorative" tendency of many of the texts that are concerned with bringing back an intimacy with God that was severed by the destruction or defiling of the holy Temple. Especially when assessing the rabbinic material, Schäfer consistently places the burden of proof on those who would claim that a given text conveys a mystical experience; or (if the passage is undeniably mystical) then, on those who would argue for a more intimate degree of mystical encounter—e.g., describing a "union" rather than mere "communion" with the divine.

When dealing with rabbinic traditions, especially those emanating from the tannaitic era, this approach brings him to an assessment that is very close to the one proposed by David Halperin in his *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature*, according to which the Work of the Chariot ought to be perceived as an exegetical activity rather than an experiential mysticism. Accordingly, Schäfer argues that the rabbis' trepidations about public dissemination of the exegesis stemmed not so much from their fears of the psychological or spiritual injuries that might be caused by the intense experience, but from their desire to avoid disrespectful over-familiarity with the Almighty. In this connection, it was surprising to note that Schäfer made almost no reference to E. Urbach's 1968 study of esoteric traditions in the tannaitic era which took a very similar critical approach when seeking to reconstruct the earliest and least embellished versions of the pertinent texts (for the most part, the same texts analyzed by Schäfer); and yet for all his determination to trim away the later embellishments and anachronisms, Urbach could not deny altogether that there was a

mystical component in the early stratum. It would have been instructive to read an explanation of why the two scholars arrived at differing conclusions.

Schäfer's minimalism leads him to a very useful taxonomy of apocalyptic ascents that distinguishes between formalistic utilization of literary clichés and intense experiential "angelifications." Even instances of the latter phenomenon, however, never cross the line into permanent abandonment of the physical body, nor to obliteration of the essential difference between God and mortals that would have been entailed in a mystical deification. In a similar vein, his method calls for a careful comparison between the divinely bestowed visions of the apocalypse and the perilous adventure of the Hekhalot ascents that does not culminate in a new gnosis, but rather in a "*unio liturgica*" where the participant may join in singing the divine praises intoned by the angelic choirs. In this connection Schäfer demonstrates, contrary to the claims of much recent scholarship, that the Qumran texts might share features with apocalyptic visions, but have no substantial connection to the Hekhalot traditions.

The Origins of Jewish Mysticism is a major summary work by an accomplished scholar, and the limitations of this review format (and of my own competence) cannot do justice to the thoughtful and precise analytical tools that the author applies to each of his documents. Transcending Prof. Schäfer's particular arguments and interpretations is his commitment to the overriding methodological principle that theoretical constructions must emerge only after a cautious understanding of the texts in their original contexts and on their own terms—and not the reverse.

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Levinas and Medieval Literature: The "Difficult Reading" of English and Rabbinic Texts, edited by Ann Astell and J. A. Jackson. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2009. 374 pp. $24.95.

Levinas and Medieval Literature is an audacious, if at times anachronistic, attempt to ascertain the saliency of re-reading medieval *chefs d'œuvre* along the lines of Emmanuel Levinas's ethical hermeneutics. Levinas always saw the act of reading as intrinsically religious, irrespective of whether the book at hand constitutes part of a sacred canon or not. In that respect, a book indeed has a face, and the face is "a book," and inasmuch as one focuses upon these themes, there is indeed ample ground to read and re-read medieval works within the context of the Levinasian discourse.