

RITUAL PRAXIS IN ANCIENT JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

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INTRODUCTION

Mystical experience is a black box to non-practitioners. Mystics engage in certain practices (prayer, rituals, etc.), which function as inputs; they have experiences inaccessible to anyone else (the black box); and, at least often, they give accounts of those experiences, which function as the output. Here I follow Evan M. Zuess's use of the term "ritual" to mean "those conscious and voluntary, repetitious and stylized symbolic bodily actions that are centered on cosmic structures and/or sacred presences."¹ By ritual praxis associated with mystical experience, I mean such praxis that claims to bring about direct experience of the divine, such as travel to the otherworld, encounters with spirits, and temporary transformation of the practitioner into a divine being. The experiences are generally described as being visual, auditory, or both, although other senses may be involved as well.

The experiences of ancient mystics are doubly inaccessible, since the practitioners are all dead and we are left only with such accounts of their experiences as have survived the vicissitudes of time. Our information for ancient mysticism comes from written instructions for engaging in mystical praxis; actual accounts of specific visionary experiences; fictional accounts of such experiences (which may nevertheless describe real praxis); and, in rare cases, architecture or artifacts tied to such rites. Such evidence can be studied with the normal array of historical-critical methods, but also by means of phenomenological comparison with other accounts of pre-modern esoteric rites and anthropological work with modern shamans and visionaries. This paper investigates how ritual praxis can contribute to our understanding of ancient Jewish and Christian mystical experience, drawing on a range of primary evidence from antiquity to the modern era and exploring the methodologies that can help us extract the maximum amount of information from that evidence.

1. TYPES OF SOURCES

a. Written instructions. Our most straightforward access to ancient mystical ritual praxis comes from written sources that explicitly give instructions for undertaking rituals intended to generate mystical experiences. A fair number of such sources survive from antiquity, and their number increases vastly in the Middle Ages and beyond. Their main advantage is that they indicate that the rites described were intended to be used and to be used for this purpose. But even so, they are not always easy to interpret.

The Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice from the Qumran library is an early and fairly well preserved example of such a text. It is set firmly in a well-established ritual context—the weekly Sabbath sacrifice of the Jerusalem Temple in the first quarter of the year—and the song for each week is dedicated, in some undefined sense, to the "sage" or *maskil*, a title known from the sectarian Qumran documents. Each song is about the praises sung by different groups of angels in the celestial temple during the Sabbath sacrifice, yet the actual songs sung by these angels are never given. On the one hand, it is hard to doubt that the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice were involved in some sort of mystical ritual praxis, likely a

communal one involving a cultic drama.² But on the other hand, we lack crucial information about their meaning, social context, and use, perhaps because it was only transmitted orally alongside the texts. Even very basic questions about them remain highly debated.

The Talmudic-era magical handbook known as *Sefer HaRazim*, or the Book of the Mysteries, is another example of such an instructional document. The rituals in it are generally intended to bring about a specific real-world outcome, such as making a woman fall in love, bringing about the downfall of an enemy, healing an affliction, or even to light a stove in cold weather. Nevertheless, a few are aimed at producing a mystical experience as defined above. For example, the rites associated with the angels of the fifth camp of the first firmament (§§89-93) involve necromantic divination in which the departed spirit manifests itself for interrogation, in one case specifically as a pillar of smoke. The rite for the angels of the seventh camp of the same firmament (§§100-104) again involves divinatory mysticism in which a spirit appears as a pillar of fire and cloud in the shape of a man and answers the questions of the practitioner. Both the invocation and the dismissal procedures for these rites involve specific actions using specified materia at a specified time, punctuated by the recitation of an incantation.³

b. Firsthand accounts of actual mystical experiences or sessions. First-person written accounts of mystical experiences which describe the rituals used and the resulting visions are also highly informative sources for our understanding of ancient mystical ritual praxis, as long as we can be confident that the accounts are indeed firsthand and not pseudonymous. We can certainly rule out first-person narratives that are assigned to famous authors in a clearly anachronistic context (such as, for example, the book of *4 Ezra*). The best case for genuineness can be made for works that claim to be written by a named person who is nobody special. The "John" of the book of Revelation and the "Hermas" of *The Shepherd of Hermas* are good examples, and it is generally agreed that these two attributions are genuine, although there are redactional questions about parts of *The Shepherd*.

Besides the problem of establishing authorship, such works raise another methodological issue: we can generally assume that a written account of a mystical session has been produced only after extensive meditation by the author on the meaning of the experience, so it is probable that the account in our hands has undergone considerable development in the author's mind. Depending on the literary skills of the author, this internal account may also have been subjected to more or less extensive literary refinement. So, although firsthand accounts of mystical sessions may bring us tantalizing close to the mystical event, we are still a considerable distance from the raw experience.

When we look at the two texts I have mentioned, we also find that they give far more attention to the descriptions of the visionary experiences involved than to any ritual praxes that may have preceded or accompanied these visions. John gives us no more than hints when he tells us that he "was in the spirit on the Lord's day" (Rev 1:10). The "Lord's day" has some liturgical significance, apparently referring to the day of the week on which Jesus rose from the dead. And, as I have observed elsewhere,⁴ "in the spirit" can at least sometimes mean in a state of prophetic inspiration associated with singing or fasting. But this is little to go on.

Hermas provides us with more information, but he is still not very forthcoming. His first vision commenced while he was walking along glorifying God's creatures. He seems to have simply entered a state of lucid dreaming ("fell asleep") as he walked. Vision 2 begins in much the same way, although associated visions involve fasting and prayer (§6, as well as Vision 3) and dreaming (§8). Vision 4 begins on a solitary walk with prayer, and Revelation

5 with prayer while sitting on his bed in his house. Parable 2 happens during a solitary walk in the country; in Parable 5 the vision is induced with fasting and prayer while sitting on a mountain; Parable 6 begins with Hermas sitting in his house praising God and meditating on the commandments; and Parables 9 and 10 after he had written an account of earlier revelations.

Some of the physical actions tied to Hermas' visions seem to be rituals, although others may only be ritual-like. But it seems clear that he used fasting, solitude, prayer, and lucid or sleeping dream states to receive his revelations. His ritual practices and those described by other ancient first-person accounts of mystical visions could be fruitful areas for further research.

c. Fictional accounts of specific mystical experiences or sessions. A number of pseudonymous ancient Jewish apocalypses include accounts of visions that are preceded by what appear to be acts of ritual praxis. These works include the books of Daniel, *4 Ezra*, *2 Baruch*, and the Book of the Watchers (*1 Enoch* 1-36). I have discussed this ritual material in its mystical context in two previous publications.⁵ These accounts present us with the problem of trying to extract information on ancient rituals and visionary experiences from stories about them, often retellings of biblical stories. In the best-case scenario they may describe real rituals, albeit presented in a fictional setting, and even real experiences of the author, perhaps while "channeling" the venerable figure in the story. But in the worst-case scenario they may describe non-existent rituals made up by the author and entirely fictional experiences out of the author's imagination.

I have proposed a few methodological principles for dealing with such evidence.⁶ First, we should give greatest weight to rituals in these stories which are prescribed for the reader or are presented as normative—if any such rituals are presented. Second, in contexts that retell and amplify biblical stories, we should give less weight to, if not completely ignore, rituals mentioned in the biblical stories and we should focus our attention on the descriptions of rites added to these stories. And third, a new one, independent attestation of a non-biblical rite in multiple texts strengthens the probability that it is a real ritual that was actually used in similar contexts.

The above-mentioned Jewish apocalypses do not present us with any mystical rituals that are explicitly prescribed for the reader or are otherwise unambiguously presented as normative. But in some cases they do present us with new rites, not known from earlier biblical versions of the same story, which rites appear in multiple sources in similar forms. A good example is a ritual I have called the "vision quest," due to its similarities to more recent Native American rites. Ezra and Baruch undertake week-long periods of self-isolation, fasting, and mourning (weeping) which culminate in visions. Daniel likewise undertakes prolonged fasts (one of unspecified duration and another of three weeks), with mourning and self-denial, which result in angelic revelatory visitations.

There is much relatively straightforward work to be done to identify and analyze fictional accounts of mystical rituals in ancient texts. An analysis, for example, of Christian apocalypses of the first four or five centuries is likely to be fruitful.⁷

d. Architecture and artifacts. Ancient Jewish and Christian material culture is largely outside my area of specialization and I note it mainly as a potentially useful source for our understanding of ancient mystical ritual praxis. I will mention one example. The Babylonian Aramaic incantation bowls excavated over a century ago at the site of Nippur by the University of Pennsylvania are a rare case in which artifacts used in mystical rituals come to us embedded in the physical context in which they were actually used: in this instance

buried in houses and in a graveyard.⁸ Although their chief purpose seems to have been exorcistic, visionary ascents also figure in them (Montgomery 9, 32, 33). Their excavated contexts have lent support to the theory that they were used as demon traps to keep households secure against infestations of such creatures. It is possible that further attention to their original physical contexts alongside their allusions to ritual praxes associated with their use would be illuminating.⁹

2. REFLECTIONS ON METHODOLOGY

A whole array of methodologies is available to us for studying ancient mystical ritual praxis and it behooves us to make full use of all of them. Here I catalogue some of the main ones and comment briefly on each. Traditional **historical-critical methods** remain fundamental for reconstructing, deciphering, and providing a basic exegesis of these texts, and are necessary but not sufficient for understanding them. And after applying these fundamental methods, in many cases commonsense **ad-hoc methodological principles** become obvious to us as we work with the texts and these are difficult to categorize further. I have referred to some of these above and I see no need for additional comment on them.

The remaining methodological observations in this paper, the ones I find most interesting and worthy of comment, involve **phenomenological comparisons** of mystical ritual praxis in ancient Jewish and Christian texts with rituals in other texts, both ancient and modern. These involve comparison of both the structure of such rites and the cultural and experiential contexts in which they are embedded. Phenomenological comparisons may be made with a number of different kinds of texts using a number of overlapping methods. I organize my discussion below broadly around the different categories of text, interweaving methodological comments among them.

a. Comparisons with Greco-Roman and ancient Near Eastern texts. There are many texts from the Hellenistic period through late antiquity which deal with rituals associated with mystical experience and some of these have important points of comparison with the Jewish and Christian sources that are the focus of this paper. In many, perhaps most cases there is reason to believe that the parallels arise at least in part because the texts share a cultural matrix. I think, for example, of the Hebrew *Sefer HaRazim* and the contemporary Greco-Egyptian Greek Magical Papyri, whose extensive parallels have been explored in detail and which parallels clearly are due in no small part to a widespread culture of magical praxis and mythology in the late antique Mediterranean world. The discipline of **ritual studies** offers many off-the-shelf tools for comparing such traditions. I note in particular the typologies of ritual formulated by Ronald Grimes and by Catherine Bell,¹⁰ which together give us a basic conceptual framework by which ritual corpora can be classified and compared. Such comparisons can help us understand which elements of ritual input and experiential output in a given tradition are part of the larger cultural matrix and which are internal aspects native to that tradition.

b. Comparisons with cross-cultural mystical ritual praxes. The work of anthropologists over the last century or so has provided us with an abundance of descriptions of ritual praxes associated with mystical experience from all over the world, mainly from pre-literate societies, and these too can be valuable for our understanding of such ancient Jewish and Christian rituals. The key methodology for such comparisons, one that has been extensively used and refined for biblical studies by the Context Group, is to construct a **cross-cultural model** abstracted from the evidence of a number of different modern cultural traditions and to use this model as a framework for comparing the specific elements of the

ancient tradition with the anthropological accounts of the modern traditions. In my book *Descenders to the Chariot: The People Behind the Hekhalot Literature* I compared the ritual praxes in the corpus of texts associated with pre-Kabbalistic Merkavah Mysticism with a model built from shamanic traditions from Siberia, Inuit society, Native North and Meso-American societies, and Japan.¹¹ I concluded, first, that the practitioners implied by the ritual instructions of the Hekhalot texts corresponded well with this model of shamanism, especially when refined to focus on shaman-healers characteristic of agricultural societies as opposed to shamans in hunting societies. Second, the comparisons also suggested important exegetical gains for understanding the Hekhalot rituals and experiences as an organic whole. Third, the correspondences between the ritual actions, altered states of consciousness, and mystical experiences described in the Hekhalot literature on the one hand, and the very similar ritual actions declared in other societies to generate similar states and experiences made it very likely that the Hekhalot rituals were really used by actual practitioners for the purposes indicated in the texts. Much more along these lines remains to be done with the texts under consideration in this paper.¹²

c. Comparisons with modern ceremonial magic. This area of comparison is likely to be controversial and I include it with some trepidation. But it is a potentially useful resource, which has been employed very little in this context, and it deserves more attention.

Ancient magical traditions like those found in the Greek Magical Papyri and the Hermetic corpus were picked up and developed by medieval Western magicians, and their traditions and grimoires were in turn adopted, developed further, and systematized by Renaissance magicians. The most interesting such development in the context of modern ceremonial magic was carried out by the English Renaissance scholar and polymath John Dee, who in the late sixteenth century undertook a long series of mystical séances during which his "scryer," a dubious rogue named Edward Kelley, would enter a trance, stare into a crystal stone, and relate revelations from numerous angels. These revelations included two detailed systems of magical praxis, the second of which is a system of vision magic which has come to be called "Enochian," due to the claim by the angelic revealers that it was first delivered to the patriarch Enoch.

More by good luck than by any planning by Doctor Dee, the bulk of his meticulous private notes on these angelic séances has survived to the present and they run to many hundreds of pages. This collection gives us some of the most detailed and extensive firsthand accounts extant of the actual use of mystical ritual praxis, and they are of no little interest as a phenomenological parallel to the ancient texts we study in these two SBL groups.

In the mid-seventeenth century the second part of Dee's notes, the section containing the revelation of the Enochian magic system, came into the hands of Meric Casaubon, who published them in a very poor edition in 1659.¹³ They seemed to have received very little attention thereafter until the late nineteenth century, when various people began developing comprehensive systems of ritual magic and founding formal groups of practitioners. At this time Dee's less than transparently coherent Enochian revelations were creatively developed by one S. L. "Macgregor" Mathers into a systematic and workable form of ritual magic. Mathers was one of the founders of the Esoteric Order of the Golden Dawn in 1888, and his Enochian system was incorporated into their praxis. The Order suffered many schisms and leadership crises over the following years, but in 1937 Israel Regardie, a member of one of the Order's factions, published a great mass of secret documents covering the organization, philosophy, and rituals of the Golden Dawn and this remains a key source for twentieth-century mystical ritual praxis.¹⁴ It is a prototypical New Age synthesis of astrology,

elemental magic, the Tarot, Christian Kabbalah, and Enochian magic, with much material on ceremonial vision magic that invites direct comparison with our ancient texts.

Although Golden Dawn associations still exists, the heyday of the order is long past. Nevertheless, there exist parallel orders and offshoots, as well as many individual practitioners of some repute, and Dee's complete original systems have been increasingly studied and applied by practitioners in recent decades.

Modern ceremonial magic thus offers us extended accounts of the use of mystical ritual praxes, extensive instructions on how to use the rituals and on their intended outcomes, and, not least, numerous actual practitioners who may be willing to answer questions about their work. These are resources worth a closer look.

In no way do I wish to downplay the enormous methodological challenges that face us if we try to make critical use of these resources. As with the cross-cultural anthropological material, we must understand them on their own terms first and employ a rigorous methodology for abstracting data from them which can contribute to our understanding of the ancient rituals. Our cultural proximity to the traditions and practitioners is both a blessing and a curse: understanding is more readily achievable, but inevitably we shall share cultural blinders to aspect of the data as well. My aim here is not to solve any of these problems, but rather to note some of the opportunities this material presents.

I will close with a reflection on how one aspect of the modern literature on ceremonial magic has affected the way I think about the ancient mystical texts. In reading this literature I have been struck by the often-repeated principle that will and imagination are fundamental to the successful practice of vision magic.¹⁵ A visionary praxis comes with a set of rituals for placing the practitioner in a receptive state of consciousness, but also with an array of images, themes, and expectations that are to feed into the vision. It is the job of the practitioner to meditate actively on these images, themes, and expectations, using the will to focus the mind on them and, in effect, to will and imagine the vision into being.

The physical actions inherent in ancient mystical rituals are a strong indicator that the resulting visions did not just happen to recipients; these people were not just raptured into an experience outside their control, they took steps to make the vision happen. Moreover, the visions typically correspond to the sacred traditions about the otherworld native to the practitioner's culture. The experiences of modern ceremonial magicians may give us a window into a process of active, focused imagining which also was a part of the praxis and experience of the ancient mystics. It is worthwhile to keep this possibility in mind as we study the ancient texts.

A great deal more could be said about the sources and methodologies at our disposal to study ancient mystical experiences through their associated ritual practices. My purpose in this paper has been merely to flag some of the important ones, including one that has been relatively neglected until now, in the hope of inspiring additional discussion and new research.

¹ Evan M. Zuesse, "Ritual." Pages 405-22 in vol. 12 of the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (ed. Mircea Eliade et al.; 16 vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1987), quotation from p. 405.

² For discussion and bibliography see James R. Davila, "Exploring the Mystical Background of the Dead Sea Scrolls" in *The Oxford Handbook of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. Timothy H. Lim and John J. Collins; Oxford: Oxford University Press), 433-54, esp. 440-43.

³ For an English translation of *Sefer HaRazim*, see Michael A. Morgan, *Sepher Ha-Razim: The Book of Mysteries* (SBLTT 25; SBLPS 11; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983). I am

currently working on a new translation based on a better Hebrew text for the More Old Testament Pseudepigrapha Project.

⁴ James R. Davila, "The Book of Revelation and the Hekhalot Literature." SBL paper presented in the 2008 Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism Group; available as a PDF file at: http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/divinity/media/revelation_hekhalot_paper_SBL08.pdf.

⁵ idem, "Ritual in the Jewish Pseudepigrapha," in *Anthropology and Biblical Studies: Avenues of Approach* (ed. Louise J. Lawrence and Mario I. Aguilar; Leiden: Deo, 2004), 158-83; idem, "The Ancient Jewish Apocalypses and the Hekhalot Literature," in *Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism* (ed. April D. DeConick; SBLSymS 11; Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 105-25.

⁶ See Davila, "Ritual in the Jewish Pseudepigrapha," 161-63 for a more detailed discussion.

⁷ As a single example of a particular text, I note the *Zostraianos* apocalypse preserved, alas in very damaged form, in Coptic in the Nag Hammadi library (NHC VIII,1). This work contains many hints of a ritual praxis associated with its visionary ascent. It refers to prayer, self-isolation in the desert, a series of baptisms, the use of magical crowns and seals, and *nomina barbara* to be recited.

⁸ James A. Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum, 1913), 13-14.

⁹ For an attempt to elucidate the Sar Torah traditions of the Hekhalot literature by means of the scribal characteristics and the physical context of the Nippur incantation bowls, see James R. Davila, *Descenders to the Chariot: The People Behind the Hekhalot Literature* (JSJSup 70; Leiden: Brill, 2001), 275-77.

¹⁰ Ronald L. Grimes, 1985. *Research in Ritual Studies: A Programmatic Essay and Bibliography* (ALTA Bibliography Series No. 14; Metuchen N.J.: ATLA and Scarecrow, 1985), esp. pp. 1-3; Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 91-137.

¹¹ See note 9.

¹² I note also Rebecca Lesses's book *Ritual Practices to Gain Power: Angels, Incantations and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism* (HTS 44; Harrisburg: Penn., 1998), in which she analyzed the Hekhalot adjurations using speech-act theory and compared them to the adjurations of the Greek Magical Papyri and the Mithras liturgy, coming to conclusions similar to mine about the use of the rituals by actual practitioners.

¹³ The first set of Dee's notes, which include the revelation of the first system of magic, involving a seal replete with angelic names called the *Sigillum Dei Aemeth*, has been published by Joseph H. Peterson in *John Dee's Five Books of Mystery: Original Sourcebook of Enochian Magic* (York Beach, Maine: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2003). A facsimile edition of Meric Casaubon's publication of the later revelations is available in *A True and Faithful Relation of What Passed for Many Years Between Dr. John Dee and Some Spirits* (Berkeley, Calif.: Golem Media, 2008). There is a debate among modern practitioners whether the first system, involving the *Sigillum Dei Aemeth* and the second system, involving the forty-eight Calls and the Great Table, are to be regarded as a single system to be practiced jointly or two separate and independent ones.

¹⁴ For a brief history of the Order, see chapter 2 of Chic Cicero and Sandra Tabatha Cicero, *The Essential Golden Dawn: An Introduction to High Magic* (Woodbury, Minn.: Llewellyn, 2009). Regardie's publication of the Golden Dawn's documents is available as *The Golden*

Dawn: A Complete Course in Practical Ceremonial Magic (6th ed.; Woodbury, Minn.: Llewellyn, 1989).

¹⁵ See, for example Cicero and Cicero, *The Essential Golden Dawn*, 78-93.