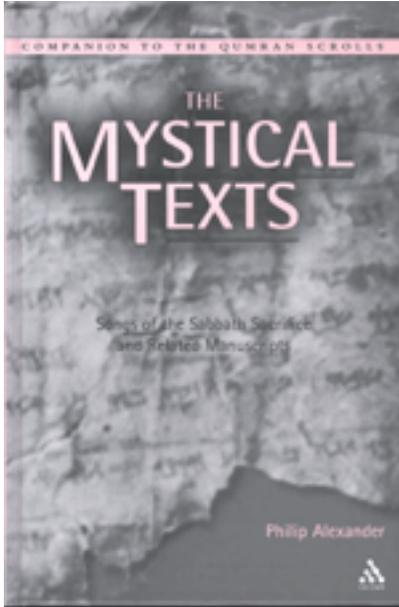


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The Mystical Texts: Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice and Related Manuscripts

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In this important new contribution to Qumran studies, Philip S. Alexander has set out to seize what he characterizes as a “strategic moment to attempt to synthesize the results” of scholarship on “mystical texts” from Qumran. With his characteristic clarity, depth, and breadth, Alexander not only synthesizes the scholarly discussion about Qumran mysticism that has taken place in recent decades but also pushes it to a new level. Using an approach grounded in phenomenology/history of religions, Alexander goes beyond what most Qumran scholars have been willing to conclude thus far and argues that there was mysticism at Qumran.

At first glance, this issue may not seem as vexed as it actually has become. Not many would deny that important thematic and literary connections can be made between the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice (hereafter Sabbath Songs), on the one hand, and, say, the *hekhalot* literature on the other. Furthermore, few would argue that liturgical texts from Qumran (as elsewhere) did not have a real *Sitz im Leben*, that they were not in some way “used” in actual religious practice. But as Alexander rightly notes, scholars have been extremely reluctant to speak about religious experience at Qumran, in part because of the paucity of data regarding the precise relationship between text and performance in (of)

the Dead Sea Scrolls, but also because of a lack of consensus regarding a definition of “mysticism” that might apply in the case of Qumran.

The first thing Alexander sets out to do is to provide a definition of mysticism and to discuss ways in which certain texts may be classified as “mystical.” Attempts to define mysticism are notoriously prone to circular reasoning and specious argumentation, but here Alexander navigates the problem deftly. Applying both “indicative” (i.e. the use of parallels) and “abstract” criteria, Alexander defines mysticism as a technical term for “a cluster of religious phenomena” that relates to religious practice within a specific religious system (Judaism, Christianity, etc.), that takes as its goal the experience of union or communion with a transcendent reality that is ultimately beyond intellectual comprehension and that has a concrete social function within the life of a particular community. With this definition in mind, Alexander gives pride of place to the Sabbath Songs as the most salient representative of Qumran mysticism. Indeed, this text serves as the touchstone for the study as a whole.

In chapter 2, “The Celestial Temple and Its Angelic Liturgy,” Alexander describes the contents of each of the thirteen Sabbath Songs in order, being careful to indicate the different manuscripts that contribute to the reconstruction of each song. This description is a helpful guide through the Sabbath Songs—they are fragmentary, elliptical, and can be difficult to comprehend—especially as he calls attention both to shared themes and differences among the various songs. Next he moves into a discussion of several key issues, all of which pertain directly to the question of Qumran mysticism: “Structure and Progression” of the text/liturgy; “Calendar and the Aspect of Time”; “The Celestial Temple”; “The Angels and Their Liturgy”; and “Sources for the Vision of Heaven.” These topics serve as the basis for comparison with “parallel texts from Qumran” (4QBlessings, 4QWords of the Luminaries, 4QDaily Prayers, 4QPseudo-Ezekiel, 4QMysteries [4Q301], 4QSongs of the Sage, 11QMelchizedek, and the Cave 1 sectarian texts [1QH^a, 1QS, 1QSa, 1QSB, 1QM]), and here Alexander makes a compelling case for how these various texts display “how integral the doctrine of the celestial temple and the angelic liturgy was to the theology of the Qumran sect” (72). He closes the chapter with several provisional conclusions, asserting that the Qumran group, throughout the life of the community, borrowed from preexisting Second Temple notions about the celestial sanctuary for its liturgical practice of worship in union with the angels—its “ascent” to the celestial temple.

In chapter 3, “Ascents to the Celestial Temple,” Alexander attempts to demonstrate how the ascents of Enoch (1 En. 14) and Levi (t. Levi 2, 8) represent an earlier ascent tradition that is reflected also in the so-called Self-Glorification Hymn of 4Q491c/4Q471b (4Q427 7, 1QH^a XXVI). Here he argues that the latter text essentially claims for its protagonist an ascent to heaven that allows him to mediate the worship of the community “in the

performance of highly charged and emotive songs which describe the angelic liturgy” (91). In this chapter Alexander suggests a rather elegant (if not entirely substantiated) proposal that ties together threads that dangle from 1QS, 1QSa, 1QH^a, Self-Glorification, and the Sabbath Songs, one that may be summarized with his own words:

If we assume that the original Self-Glorification Hymn was composed by the Teacher of Righteousness, who, in the manner of his ancestor Levi, established his priestly and prophetic credentials within the community by an ascent to heaven, then it would make sense to see each successive Maskil as reaffirming the Teacher’s experience, and as demonstrating in his own right his fitness to lead the community. And in doing so he would be anticipating the eschatological high priest who would finally and permanently achieve angelic priestly status in all its fullness at the end of days. (89)

At this point in the progression of the book, there are a number of problems and questions left unresolved by Alexander, primarily methodological and theoretical problems that he deals with in chapter 4 such as the difference between textual tradition and experience, the definition of a sectarian text, the nature of worship at Qumran, and so forth. While methodological issues such as this might typically help to provide the overall framework of an argument—and as such might usually come toward the beginning of a scholarly work—in *The Mystical Texts* Alexander’s framework of “mysticism” subsumes even his method, and it is only after he has presented his main conclusions that he circles back to sweep up many of the remaining pieces. Although at first I found this aspect of his book to be problematic and distracting, in the end it does not weaken the effort but rather serves to bring his arguments into starker relief. By the time he clarifies his broader theoretical disposition and the implications of his arguments, the reader (or this reader, at least) is perhaps more prepared to accept them given his prior treatment of the relevant texts themselves.

In chapter 4, “Mystical Praxis at Qumran,” Alexander immediately raises what is perhaps the central question regarding Qumran mysticism: “can we be sure that [their desire for communion with the transcendent divine world] was ever translated into practice? Might not all this be pure literary fantasy?” Alexander argues that indeed it was not pure literary fantasy; the texts themselves may be literary/exegetical to a degree, but he asserts that there is no inverse proportionality of literariness to practicability as Qumran (and other) scholars have tended to assume. The rest of chapter 4 is devoted to a discussion of both the nature and the practical achievement of “the Unio Mystica” at Qumran, with recourse to many of the texts introduced in previous chapters.

The fifth and final chapter moves the reader into the comparative dimension Alexander promises at the beginning of the book, where he undertakes to place Qumran mysticism within the broader spectrum of the history of Western mystical traditions. Alexander's primary aim in this chapter, it seems, is to find a suitable way of thinking about Qumran mysticism vis-à-vis *hekhalot* and early Christian sources. With respect to the former, he suggests that, on the one hand, the relevant Qumran texts represent a "sectarian reworking of a priestly doctrine that originated in Jerusalem," and, on the other, the *hekhalot* tradition represents a form of the same doctrine that was introduced to (and modified by) the rabbinic movement in the early post-70 period when at least some priests would have been absorbed into the normative Judaism then emerging.

After a short reevaluation of G. Scholem's historical framework for the development of Jewish mysticism, which is a necessary consequence of Alexander's inclusion of Qumran in that development (Scholem allowed only for its emergence no earlier than the third century C.E.), Alexander closes with a brief discussion of several parallels between Qumran and early Christian mysticism. Here he focuses on the epistles to the Hebrews and the Colossians as well as Rev 4–5, with passing reference to a few third- and fourth-century Christian texts such as the Apostolic Constitutions, Ignatius's *Epistle to the Trallians*, and the *Angelic Hierarchy* of Pseudo-Dionysius.

It is somewhat odd that the ostensible methodological goal of the book as a whole—a comparative approach to Qumran mysticism—gets so little treatment in its final chapter. The book employs a history of religions model only in a loose sense: it is concerned with the genealogy of a particular religious modality (mysticism) within several related Jewish and Christian traditions but does not really take up the comparative enterprise in the manner usually applied (and implied) by *Religionsgeschichte*. If Alexander's analysis is based on a broader comparative perspective, the book does not reflect this as explicitly and extensively as it might have done. The truncated nature of this part of the book does not weaken Alexander's main arguments, but it does leave the reader wanting him to fill out the picture he sketches here.

One relatively unsatisfying aspect of the book is Alexander's discussion of the "sectarian" nature of the texts he analyzes for their mystical content. Although he is right in seeing the need to address this question, this section (in ch. 4) does not do justice to the complex issue of how sectarian texts might have been "used." Alexander relies on statements such as "Sabbath Songs has a more sectarian feel to it" (97) and "It is a moot point whether or not 4QWords of the Luminaries is sectarian, but it chimes in with the general tenor of Sabbath Songs" (97), and he finally states that "the question of whether a given text is or is not sectarian may not be all that crucial to our analysis, provided it fits with the Qumran religious ethos and seems to have been influential there" (98). But surely this needs

further qualification if we are to imagine the actual *use* of these texts—or at least the praxis refracted through them. According to Alexander’s broader conclusions, these texts must not merely “fit” or be “influential” but must relate to the *actual practice* of an *actual group* (even if that group and its practices changed over time). Texts can be sectarian in a variety of ways—they can be authored by members of the sect, modified according to sectarian proclivities, appropriated and deployed in a sectarian context—but that does not necessarily tell us something concrete about their use. Of course, this is not Alexander’s problem (it is the problem of all scholars of Qumran literature), but as one of the problems that Alexander strives to overcome it needed more careful consideration in his book. (For the record, I agree that the texts he analyzes are on the whole sectarian insofar as they “fit with the Qumran religious ethos.”)

On another note, in his discussion of the biblical sources for the vision of heaven in the Sabbath Songs (ch. 2), Alexander correctly states that there is no precise “biblical precedent” for the sevenfoldness of the heavenly realm in that text. But Jubilees states that God made “seven great works” on the first day, works that include most aspects of Jubilees’ cosmology and that apparently God “prepared through the knowledge of his mind” (2:2). If Jubilees is “biblical” for the writer(s) of the Sabbath Songs, as some would argue, then does this change how we might think about such a precedent? This is a minor point, and in any case Jubilees, despite its great preoccupation with the number seven, is more concerned with the sevenfoldness of history than of cosmological structures.

The Mystical Texts is a short book (143 pages of main text) but dense (yet clear) and forceful. Despite a few problematic aspects of the book, overall it is thoughtful, engaging, and well-written, and it provides an important new lens through which to reconsider several key Qumran texts and the social world in which they came into being. Happily, the book is almost entirely free of typos and other errors, and the bibliographies at the end of each chapter constitute a helpful resource of well-chosen suggestions for further reading.

It is indeed unfortunate, as Alexander himself notes (114), that we do not possess for the Qumran group the kind of description of actual worship that Philo offers for the Therapeutae (*On the Contemplative Life* 64–89). Such a description could make us considerably more sanguine about our knowledge of the concrete practices and experiences that might lay behind the textual remains. In any case, if Alexander’s reading of the relevant texts is correct, it would seem that we must not only revise our histories of Jewish mysticism. Those who take the Qumran texts to comprise a “library,” a storehouse of knowledge of a particular group, must then also reread *all* of the Qumran material in this light. I have yet to decide whether or not I am prepared to do that, but Alexander has pushed me closer to thinking it would be a good idea.