

Article

“Mystical Spirituality” in Second Temple Period Judaism? Light from the Decorated Stone in the Magdala Synagogue

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Abstract: While “Merkavah mysticism” as a religious movement is a phenomenon of Late Ancient and Medieval Judaism, scholars have debated whether the origins of this movement are traceable to traditions of the divine Merkavah (chariot-throne) preserved in some early Jewish apocalyptic literature from the Second Temple period. Furthermore, scholars have emphasized that these early Merkavah traditions reflect individualistic religious experiences that emerged historically in contexts of small esoteric groups of initiates who claimed a privileged experience and knowledge of the divine. In this article, I wish to do two things: (1) to establish methodologically the point that, from an analytical perspective, we can, indeed, speak of a kind of Jewish “mystical spirituality” present in the Second Temple period akin to later Jewish mystical traditions; and (2) to argue that, in light of some iconographic features on the decorated stone from the first-century synagogue at Magdala, early Jewish “mystical spirituality” was not a phenomenon restricted to the individual but could also involve an assembled community’s experience of divine presence.

Keywords: Merkavah mysticism; early Jewish apocalypses; Dead Sea Scrolls; Magdala Stone; ancient synagogues



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1. Introduction

The term “Merkavah mysticism” is typically used to refer to the religious movement given voice in the Hekhalot and Kabbalistic literature of Late Ancient and Medieval Judaism. Hekhalot texts, in particular, characteristically orbit around visions of the divine chariot-throne (Heb. *merkavah*) as first described in some biblical tradition (esp. Ezekiel), and the adventures of a traveling mystic who makes his way through the seven heavenly “palaces” or “temples” (Heb. *hekhal*). While Merkavah mysticism as a formal religious movement and the Hekhalot literature as a “complete literary system” (Schäfer 1992) are, indeed, much later phenomena, scholars have long debated whether their origins are traceable to traditions of the Merkavah presented in some apocalyptic literature from the Second Temple period (e.g., Scholem 1954, pp. 120–27; Elior 2005; Gruenwald 2014). Furthermore, scholars have emphasized that these early Merkavah traditions reflect individualistic religious experiences that emerged historically in contexts of small esoteric groups of initiates who claimed a privileged experience and knowledge of the divine. In this article, I wish to do two things: (1) to establish methodologically the point that, from an analytical perspective, we can, indeed, speak of a kind of Jewish “mystical spirituality” present in the Second Temple period akin to later Jewish mystical traditions, in that, as Rufus Jones put it over a century ago, these sources place an emphasis on “direct and intimate consciousness of the Divine Presence” (Jones 1909), that is, they construct a vision of divine reality that is “mentally experienceable” (Gruenwald 2014, p. 18); and (2) to argue that, in light of some iconographic features on the decorated stone from the first-century synagogue at Magdala, early Jewish “mystical spirituality” was not a phenomenon restricted to the individual but could also involve an assembled community’s experience of divine presence.

The article proceeds in three sections. In the first, I offer methodological reflections on the concepts of “mysticism” and “spirituality” within the modern study of religion,

with special attention to issues of definition, categorization, and applicability to ancient Judaism. In the second section, I devote special attention to the iconographic program of the decorated stone from the Magdala synagogue, arguing that its back panel does, indeed, contain a visual representation of the divine Merkavah. In the third and final section, I attempt to locate this iconography within a larger discourse concerning the accessibility of God's presence in the Second Temple period.

2. "Spirituality" and "Mysticism" in the Study of Religion and Ancient Judaism

In her book on spirituality and the American religious imagination, Courtney Bender notes that the concept of spirituality—much like the concept of religion itself—is plagued not by a dearth of definitions but rather by a proliferation of them (Bender 2010, p. 5). The adjacent concepts of mysticism and religious experience, too, tend to evade singular scholarly definition. While Bender, for her part, chooses to avoid the quagmire of definition, focusing on what these concepts *do* for certain communities rather than what they *are*, she mentions that the dominant scholarly understanding among social scientists is that all of these concepts inherently have to do with the individual rather than the collective (Bender 2010, p. 16). Early sociologists of religion, such as Ernst Troeltsch and Joachim Wach, laid the foundation for an analytical distinction—one that Bender argues still circulates in religious studies scholarship today—between "mystical religion" and "socialized religion" (Bender 2010, pp. 10–11). Whereas mystical religion was thought to emerge from unmediated experiences of "introversion" that concern "the individual and innermost self" and its consciousness of the divine (Wach [1947] 2019, pp. 413–14), socialized religion was understood to be organized and embedded within institutionalized religious collectives.

The idea of an individualistic and introverted mystical spirituality in Judaism was affirmed and developed by Gershom Scholem in his classic work *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Scholem 1954). While Scholem's work focused mostly on the medieval Kabbalah, his theory that the mysticism of the late-Talmudic and post-Talmudic era could be directly traced, historically and conceptually, to the early Jewish apocalyptic literature of the first century BCE has become the point of departure for major studies of the origins of Jewish mysticism. Distinguished scholars have both supported (e.g., although in revised fashion, Elior 2005; Orlov 2017; Gruenwald 2014) and criticized (e.g., Halperin 1988; Schäfer 1992, 2009; Idel 2000) his theory. For Scholem, who was chiefly inspired in his definition of mysticism by two Christian thinkers—Thomas Aquinas and twentieth-century Quaker Rufus Jones—the attitude of the mystic is "determined by the fundamental experience of the inner self which enters into immediate contact with God or the metaphysical Reality" (Scholem 1954, p. 53). Scholem's formulation here is quite close to Jones', who, by using the term "mysticism," referred to "the type of religion which puts the emphasis on immediate awareness of relation with God, on direct and intimate consciousness of the Divine Presence" (Jones 1909, p. xv).

Thus, Scholem's definition and understanding of "mysticism" is, at least in his *Major Trends*, quite broad. In my view, this broad approach to definition is what allowed Scholem to draw both a phenomenological and historical-evolutionary connection between the mysticism of early Jewish apocalyptic literature and the mysticism found in later rabbinic and post-rabbinic literature via the shared feature of visionary experiences of the Merkavah, the divine chariot-throne of the god of Israel. For Scholem, the earliest Jewish mysticism reflected in the early apocalyptic literature is "throne-mysticism," that is, the perception of God's appearance on his chariot-throne, as described by prophet Ezekiel, and consciousness of the mysteries of that visionary throne-world (Scholem 1954, p. 127). While the mystical experiences represented in the Hekhalot literature certainly differ in a number of ways, they, too, pinnacle upon a seer's vision of the divine Merkavah. Therefore, not only was Scholem willing to describe the religious experience reflected in both earlier and later literature as "mysticism," he also wanted to unify them into one larger Merkavah tradition (see Orlov 2017, pp. 205–206).

Peter Schäfer, among others, has been much less inclined towards such harmonization. In his *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, Schäfer spends nearly 400 pages showing the significant differences that exist among the Merkavah traditions found beginning in Ezekiel 1, the early ascent apocalypses,¹ Philo, the Qumran documents (especially the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice and the Self-Glorification Hymn), and the Talmudic and Hekhalot traditions. For him, the differences among them are simply too great to unify them under one overarching category or posit any direct and unified historical connection; the romantic quest for the “origins” of Jewish mysticism is, thus, a futile one. The term “mysticism” is itself also problematic for Schäfer. Seeing the concept of *unio mystica* (mystical union with God) as the “backbone” of most definitions of mysticism, Schäfer, like Scholem before him, flatly rejects this concept as one present in ancient and medieval Jewish literature, since this literature clearly resists any ontological conflation between Creator and creature (Schäfer 2009, pp. 17–20). Further, in his earlier book, *The Hidden and Manifest God*, Schäfer suggests the term “mysticism” has “individualistic leanings,” which, he thinks, obfuscates the radical and social-revolutionary nature of much of this literature, including the Hekhalot texts, as they—and the social circles that formed them—sought to transform “the conception of the world of the so-called classical or normative Judaism [. . .]” (Schäfer 1992, p. 5).

Schäfer’s criticisms are valuable as we think about Jewish mystical spirituality in the Second Temple period. His critique of the scholarly quest for “origins” is entirely sound, as is his concern that “mysticism” is a term foreign to the ancient Jewish texts themselves and deeply imbued with Christian theological assumptions (Schäfer 2009, pp. 354–55). However, the supposed individualistic leanings of the concepts of “mysticism” and “spirituality” have been insightfully addressed in Bender’s work, which argues that these concepts, no matter how they are actually defined, are entangled in social life and should not be extracted from the social institutions where they are lived out (Bender 2010, pp. 5–6). These concepts are not put to use within a historical or cultural vacuum but rather are situated within broader discourses of identity formation. Practices of mystical spirituality simultaneously draw upon and manipulate established patterns of religion. While literary traditions might be formed around the experiences of an individual mystic on an adventurous journey toward the divine, such traditions are usually meant for consumption by a collective. Thus, the social-revolutionary character of, for example, the Hekhalot texts or the earlier ascent apocalypses is not really a reason to reject “mysticism” as an analytical tool for either body of literature, as Schäfer himself seems, in the end, to suggest (Schäfer 2009, p. 354).

Therefore, for the purposes of this article, if we take a broad approach to definition as suggested by Jones and Scholem long ago—envisioning “mysticism” as an experience “which puts the emphasis on immediate awareness of relation with God, on direct and intimate consciousness of the Divine Presence”—then we seem to be on relatively safe ground in claiming that “mysticism” aptly describes the experiences recounted in many of the apocalypses and in some Qumranic literature from the Second Temple period, whether or not they represent the historical forerunner to the later Merkavah mysticism of the Hekhalot literature, as argued by Scholem and affirmed more recently by Elior and Alexander (Elior 2005; Alexander 2006). Furthermore, it is important to note that even Schäfer, despite his keen interests in undermining the quest for origins and in highlighting the disparities among the literary traditions involving the Merkavah, is still willing to acknowledge that there is, indeed, something that binds these traditions together, some common denominator. After affirming the great diversity found in the sources, Schäfer says:

What nevertheless unities all these variegated efforts that are reflected in their respective bodies of literature is the craving of their authors to bridge the gap between heaven and earth, between human beings and heavenly powers, between man and God. In most cases, moreover, is the attempt to *restore* the lost relationship of some ancient and originally whole past: because the Temple as the natural venue for the encounter between God and his human creatures on earth has been destroyed or polluted or usurped by a competing community; because the soul, severed from its divine origin, has been entombed in its human

body; or because, after the termination of prophetic revelation, the Torah has become the only vehicle for approaching God. So, at stake in our sources—a wide range of discrete forms and implementations notwithstanding—is the attempt to get (back) to God as close as possible, to experience the living and loving God, despite the desolate situation on earth with all its shortcomings and catastrophes. (Schäfer 2009, p. 353)

In the end, the “common denominator” that Schäfer describes, which centers upon the “encounter between God and his human creatures” and “experience of the living God” (Schäfer 2009, p. 354), sounds a lot like the “mysticism” defined by Jones and Scholem. Further, while Schäfer understands that, behind the textual sources, stand geographically and chronologically diverse communities, the mystical experiences represented are reserved for the individual: “the individual is deemed worthy of experiencing God for the sake of his community on earth” (Schäfer 2009, pp. 353–54). Like the vast majority of scholars of Jewish mysticism, Schäfer, thus, understands this divine encounter, just like he understands the general concept of “mysticism,” within an individualistic framework.

In the following section, I wish to build on Schäfer’s observations quoted above by expanding the pool of data for the study of early Jewish mysticism, now bringing into the conversation the recently discovered (2009) decorated stone from the Magdala synagogue. While not invalidating Schäfer’s (and others’) emphasis on mysticism as individual experience, the iconographic evidence from the decorated stone at Magdala, I will suggest, adds a focus on the collective experience of a community as it encounters the Merkavah, the divine presence, through visual perception within the social space of the town’s public synagogue.

3. The Decorated Stone from the Magdala Synagogue

The story of the 2009 discovery of a pre-70 CE synagogue during a salvage dig at the site of ancient Magdala² and, along with it, a uniquely decorated stone artefact, has been reported in various media venues, although no detailed excavation report on the synagogue or the stone has been published yet.³ Nevertheless, scholarly research on both the synagogue and the stone is clearly picking up steam. The years between 2013 and 2015 saw a small explosion of publications either fully or partially devoted to interpreting the artefact,⁴ as did the year 2020.⁵ At the time of the current article’s writing, the highly anticipated publication by Rina Talgam, the stone’s lead researcher, is still forthcoming.⁶ My goal here, therefore, is not to give a report on the site or offer a holistic interpretation of the stone, but rather to focus on a specific decorative feature on it and to locate it within our larger discussion of Jewish spirituality in the Second Temple period.

The decorated stone, rectangular and made from limestone, was discovered among the remains of what was the main hall of Magdala’s synagogue and, according to my own measurements, is ca. 68 cm long, 56 cm wide, and 37/42 cm high (façade-panel side/back-panel side). As Steven Fine has noted, there is no consensus yet on the stone’s original function, which makes the interpretation of its decorative program challenging (Fine 2017; but see Runesson 2017, p. 162). Nevertheless, a number of its iconographic elements are well known in ancient Jewish art. Rosettes, amphorae, oil lamps, and, most significantly, a seven-branched menorah appear on the stone’s face (top), façade, and side panels, respectively (see Figures 1 and 2).⁷



Figure 1. Façade Panel, featuring a menorah flanked by two amphorae. Image used with permission.



Figure 2. Back Panel, featuring wheels with “flashing fire” beneath. Image used with permission.

However, the most difficult—and most controversial—elements to identify and interpret have been the images on the stone’s back panel. This panel consists of three vertical segments forming two arch-like spaces, within which two circular images appear with semi-circular carvings in relief below each. The two circular objects have a small center piece from which diverge six, relatively straight and uniform radial arms. The excavators of the stone, Dina Avshalom-Gorni and Arfan Najar, originally interpreted the two circular objects six-petal rosettes.⁸ However, in 2013, Mordechai Aviam published the first wholistic study of the stone, in which he interpreted them, along with the semi-circular carvings below them, as the wheels of the divine chariot throne with “flashes of lighting” or “flames of fire.” Aviam suggested, therefore, that the stone as a whole was intended to be a three-dimensional representation of the Jerusalem temple, and that the back panel specifically was to represent “a mystical, allegorical view directly into the Holy of Holies, through its architectural frame into the place of the Divine Spirit, represented by its chariot” (Aviam 2013b, p. 213).

While appreciating the spectacular nature of its discovery, Fine has called for a much more mundane interpretation of the stone’s iconography in general and its back panel specifically, concluding that the circular objects are not chariot wheels but “are typical of rosettes found throughout Judaea” (Fine 2017, p. 35). He describes the view of Aviam and others—that the stone is a profound expression of “Temple-driven sanctity and Divine Presence”—as an example of a trend in the popular consumption of archaeology that he calls “Da Vinci codification” (Fine 2017, p. 38). That is, for Fine, Aviam’s view represents a

sensationalist interpretation of the stone that has been highly influenced by the religious significance, for both Jews and Christians, which Magdala's Roman Catholic sponsors have increasingly attributed to it. Magdala is a religiously charged site, Fine asserts, and interpretations of the stone have so far been energized by its contemporary setting.

Fine is absolutely right to point out that Aviam and his followers have overinterpreted aspects of the stone's iconography and its social significance, especially with reference to the decorations on the stone's face and the fantastical claim that the *Parables of Enoch* (1 Enoch 37–71) were actually composed in Magdala (see [Aviam 2013a](#), p. 159; [Aviam 2014](#); critiqued in [Fine 2017](#), pp. 32–33). And Fine's "artifact-first" hermeneutical strategy—as opposed to the attempt to link the entirety of the stone's decorative program into a set of biblical texts—is an important methodological corrective. However, it seems to me that Fine's approach has swung the pendulum too far the other way. Magdala's intense contemporary religious environment does not, *ipso facto*, mean that Aviam's interpretation is "sensationalist," and it is not quite fair to lump Aviam and other scholars in with popular consumption of archaeology like searches for the "Lost Ark" and the forged papyrus of Jesus's wife (see [Fine 2017](#), p. 38). Unlike searches for the "Lost Ark", we actually have in our possession the Magdala Stone; and unlike the papyrus of Jesus's wife, the Magdala Stone is not a forgery. While it is entirely acceptable to differ in method and interpretation, in my view it goes a bridge too far to attribute that difference squarely to the religiously charged nature of the contemporary site.

Furthermore, there are a couple of important formal features on the stone's back panel, related to the circular objects and semi-circular carvings beneath, upon which Fine does not comment, leaving his view that they are rosettes exposed to criticism. First, one will notice that at the center of each of these objects is a small circle. On the one hand, these small circles could form the centers of budding flowers and, hence, the objects could very well, in fact, be rosettes. On the other hand, in the object to the right, the center circle is concave, while in the object to the left it is protruded. While we do have sources, mainly from Jewish ossuaries, that evince two carved rosettes set side-by-side both with either a protruding or concave center circle, to my knowledge we have no sources that show in a single design one rosette with a concave center and the other with a protruding center, as is the case on the back of the Magdala Stone. Second, the radial lines jetting out from the center of the circular objects are not spear-shaped, like buds of a flower, as is standard in most, or perhaps even all, rosette patterns in Jewish art of the Second Temple period, including the three found at Magdala. These two points alone lead me to agree with Aviam's suggestion, that the small center circles on the Stone's back are hubcaps and the radial lines are spokes of wheels ([Aviam 2013b](#), p. 213); the left wheel is viewed from the outside, with its protruding hubcap at center, while the right wheel is viewed from the inside with its concave hubcap at center. The third point that suggests these objects as wheels is comparative. While we have no contemporaneous data for the artistic representation of chariot wheels, at least that I am aware of, the style of these objects, indeed, resembles the clear depiction of the wheels of a portable Torah shrine carved on a limestone slab from the fifth/sixth-century synagogue at Capernaum (Figure 3). One may note that, on the wheel to the right, there is the semblance of a protruding hubcap. From another comparative perspective, there are three clear examples of rosettes found at Magdala, including the one on the Stone's face (partially seen in Figure 2), which comprise two different patterns (six-petal with connecting segments; eight-petal); our two circular objects set within the high arches on the Stone's back do not resemble either of the schematics chosen for the rosettes.



Figure 3. Torah Shrine on Wheels, from fifth/sixth-century synagogue in Capernaum. Photo by author.

Therefore, Aviam's interpretation of the Stone's back panel and the Stone as a whole as, in some way, a representation of the Jerusalem temple seems to me essentially correct. His view has been basically followed by Talgam, and, now, even the excavators of the Stone have changed their original interpretation in favor of Aviam's. Donald Binder (2014), Richard Bauckham (2015), and, most recently, Lutz Doering (2020) and Judith Newman (2020), have also followed Aviam's lead. However, none of these scholars has attempted to locate the Stone's representation of the Merkavah within a larger social and institutional context as well as the historical—even if non-linear—development of Merkavah mysticism. This is what I wish to do in the remainder of this article.

4. The Magdala Stone's Merkavah Scene in Context

Speculation on the divine chariot throne seems to have been a point of debate within early Judaism. Some tannaitic rabbis strongly forbade public exposition of the Merkavah episode of Ezekiel 1 (*m. Meg.* 4:10; *m. Hag.* 2:1), in which, as Elioer mentions, Ezekiel experiences a mystical transformation of the Holy of Holies (Elioer 2005, pp. 63–64). The inanimate cultic vessels of the inner sanctuary—all made of polished bronze⁹—become four correspondingly animated winged creatures, having the same bronze glow and standing on four “wheels” (Hebrew: *אופנים*) in the same manner as the temple vessels once did. As Schäfer has argued, the rabbinic prohibition against expounding on this Ezekielian Merkavah probably stemmed from a desire to protect the privacy of God's own sovereign realm (Schäfer 2009, p. 185); one should not get too close to the divine, even in one's textual exegesis.

Other ancient Jews thought differently, as Ezekiel's Merkavah tradition was received, interpreted, and reinterpreted within a number of early Jewish sources. David Halperin's influential work, for example, has demonstrated that Ezekiel's vision thoroughly inspired the Merkavah visions of early Jewish texts such as *1 Enoch* (esp. in *Book of Watchers* [14: 8–20] and *Parables of Enoch* [61: 10; 71: 5–7]¹⁰), the Qumranic *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* (4Q405 [ShirShabb^f] frags. 20 ii–22 lines 1–11 = 11Q17 [ShirShabb] VII),¹¹ and the book of Daniel (7: 9–14) (Halperin 1988).¹² I refer the reader to Halperin's book for details on the various ways these texts have reworked the Ezekielian Merkavah. For our purposes, what is important to note here is that these texts—*1 Enoch*, 4qShirShabb^f, and Daniel—are the *only* pre-70 Jewish sources that describe a vision of the chariot-wheel throne of God and, like Ezekiel, place it within the context of a vision of the heavenly temple.¹³ *1 Enoch* and 4qShirShabb^f place their visions of the divine chariot within the context of the heavenly temple's inner sanctuary, a point seen in their association of the fiery wheels with the

cherubim (1 En. 14: 11–12, 18–19;¹⁴ 61: 10; 71: 7;¹⁵ 4Q405 [ShirShabb^f] 20 ii–22 3, 7–8; cf. Ezek 10: 2, 6, 9). A temple context may seem less apparent for Daniel’s Merkavah episode, but Crispin Fletcher-Louis has made the compelling argument that the “one like a son of man” in Daniel 7 would have been understood in the late Second Temple period as a high priestly royal figure, perhaps fashioned in affirmation of the Hasmonean priest-kings, and that Daniel’s portrayal of the son of man as “coming on the clouds of heaven . . . evokes the Day of Atonement when the high priest enters God’s presence surrounded by clouds of incense” (cf. Lev 16:13).¹⁶ Thus, while perhaps not a major theme for Daniel, a setting within a heavenly temple is likely.

As Fine has pointed out, in many ways the iconography of the Stone is rather generic: the Jerusalem temple and its sacred vessels, even the menorah, are described and depicted in a range of early Jewish sources.¹⁷ This, indeed, should caution us against finding a programmatically biblical focus in the Stone’s decorative program (Fine 2017, pp. 37–38). But herein lies the significance of the wheels depicted on the Stone’s back. When we ask where in early Jewish literature one finds the concept of the divine chariot and, specifically, its fiery wheels set within the framework of temple, as on the Stone, we are left with only the literary sources discussed above, including Ezekiel itself. This certainly does not mean that the community that produced and visually consumed the Stone was simultaneously reading or directly drawing from these written sources for the Stone’s artistic inspiration. But it does seem to suggest that the Stone participated, along with these sources, in a larger discourse concerning Merkavah speculation and the mystical experience of the divine presence.

Moving its viewers in the opposite ideological direction to some early rabbis who wished to guard the privacy of God, the Stone’s Merkavah scene, in contrast, presents an exposition of the divine presence that is perceptible, consumable, and experienceable. And, importantly, this exposition is set within the collective institutional space of Magdala’s public synagogue, not within the conceptual space of an individual’s ascent into the celestial temple or esoteric ecstatic experience, as described in the ascent apocalypses and later Hekhalot literature. The Stone’s Merkavah scene is, thus, intended to facilitate a public “mystical spirituality,” in the sense that it places emphasis on “immediate awareness of relation with God, on direct and intimate consciousness of the Divine Presence” (Jones 1909, p. xv) and constructs a vision of divine reality that is “mentally experienceable” (Grunwald 2014, p. 18). From this perspective, the Stone challenges the modern assumption that “mystical religion” in Jewish antiquity was only a matter of individualistic religious experience. Instead, the Stone provides an example of the point made by Bender, that the practice of “spirituality” is always socially and cultural situated, being embedded within a society’s institutional landscape.

5. Early Jewish “Mystical Spirituality” and Jesus

There have been two developments in the world of Jesus studies—one recent and one at least thirty years in the making—that allow us to see some broad cultural connections between the type of “mystical spirituality” discussed above and the Jesus presented on the pages of the canonical Gospels. The first, which emerged with Seán Freyne’s seminal work in 1980, is the significance of the Galilee as the cultural and historical matrix of Jesus and his earliest followers.¹⁸ The second, and more recent, is that Jesus used the assembly space of local public synagogues to present his message about the coming kingdom of Israel’s God and the restoration of the Israel’s people (Runesson 2015, pp. 53–57; Ryan 2017). Thus, Jesus in the Galilee and Jesus in public synagogues have become intricately linked in this scholarship.

Why this latter link is significant is two-fold. First, as Aviam and some others have shown, the Galilee in the late Second Temple period was a region in close religio-cultural contact with Judea and the Jerusalem temple cult. Jesus, far from carrying out his activity in a cultural backwater—or, even less, a region in conflict with Jerusalem—was engaged in conversations with Jewish communities that revered the temple as the house of the Jewish

God and cared deeply about experiencing his presence, even though they were outside of Jerusalem's geographic orbit. While we need to be careful about overgeneralizing, the decorated stone from the Magdala public synagogue, with its Merkavah scene, might also suggest that this desire to imagine and experience the divine presence was not peculiar to religious specialists; it extended to fishermen and carpenters, bakers and homemakers alike, as they engaged socially in the life of their community via synagogue space.

Second, it could very well have been these types of villagers and townspeople that Jesus intended to engage as he spoke in synagogues throughout the Galilee about "the kingdom of God having come upon you" (Matt 4: 23; 12: 28). The Stone's expression of a temple-oriented "mystical spirituality," set within communal space, provides an interesting background to Jesus's statements about the coming kingdom and, perhaps even more, to the Gospels presentation of his own identity as the Danielic "son of man, coming on the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14: 62; Matt 24: 30; 26: 24; cf., e.g., John 1: 51; 3: 13; 6: 62). The Gospel of John, especially, seems to present Jesus, the Danielic "son of man" who ascends into and descends from heaven (Ellens 2010), as the mediator of this "mystical spirituality," but does so, as Reynolds has shown, with an apocalyptic emphasis (Reynolds 2008, 2020). John 6: 22–71 is particularly interesting to read from this perspective. Not only does the Johannine Jesus make three "son of man" statements, one of which includes his "ascending to where he was before" (6: 62), but these statements are made in the spatial setting of Capernaum's public synagogue (6: 59), only a few kilometers away from Magdala.¹⁹

Whatever historical conclusions can be drawn, the Jesus of the Gospels is concerned with cultivating a type of "spiritual" experience that has to do with connecting people to the presence of Israel's God. In my view, what the Merkavah scene on the Magdala synagogue stone demonstrates is that Jesus was not the first Jewish person to have this concern. At least in Magdala, the religio-cultural infrastructure was already in place well before Jesus's arrival on the Galilean landscape.

6. Conclusions

While it is impossible to know the extent to which the kind of Merkavah mystical spirituality facilitated by the Magdala Stone was practiced in the Second Temple period, such religious experience does not, on the other hand, seem to have been confined to the practice of individuals associated with isolated sectarian groups. We might have assumed this to be the case if all we had to go on were the ascent apocalypses and the testimony of some Dead Sea Scrolls. But the Stone, set within the public, civic space of a finely built synagogue in a Galilean town of some repute (De Luca and Lena 2015), should cause us to abandon this assumption. Further, speculation on the divine Merkavah seems to have been a popular enough issue—and enough of a problem—that some early rabbis felt compelled to issue prohibitions on *haftara* readings and expositions from Ezekiel 1. Whereas these rabbinic restrictions emerged out of a desire to guard the holiness of the divine presence, the Magdala Stone grants to synagogue attendees mystical access to it. Thus, whether or not we see the Stone as part of the earliest historical phases of development of what later became "Merkavah mysticism" proper, it almost certainly participated—along with the likes of Daniel, *1 Enoch*, the Qumran *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, and the saying of Jesus in the Gospels—in a larger discourse during in the Second Temple period centering on mystical experience of and access to the divine presence.

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Notes

- ¹ Schäfer includes the following early Jewish works under the descriptor “ascent apocalypses:” 1 Enoch 1–36 (*Book of Watchers*), 1 Enoch 37–71 (*Parables of Enoch*), *Testament of Levi*, 2 Enoch, *Apocalypse of Abraham*, *Apocalypse of Isaiah*, *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, *Apocalypse of John*, and from Qumran, *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, and the *Self-Glorification Hymn*.
- ² The identification of this site with Josephus’s Taricheae (e.g., *Ant.* 14: 120; 20: 159; *War* 1: 180; 2: 252) has been debated. Those suggesting other sites include: (Kokkinos 2010, pp. 7–23; Taylor 2014, pp. 205–23). See the response given in De Luca and Lena (2015, pp. 280–342). While ultimately only tangential to the current study, the consensus among scholars, as De Luca shows, remains that Josephus’s Taricheae should be identified with Migdal Nuniya, or what in this study is called Magdala: a sizeable ancient city occupied from the late Hellenistic or Early Roman period (dated by coins, pottery, and wall construction) until the start of the First Jewish War against Rome in 67 CE (also dated by coins), with only minor reoccupation in the second century CE and Byzantine period. A coin dated from 5–11 CE was found in the synagogue in March 2016 (the earliest coin found prior to this was one minted in Tiberias from 29 CE), providing a *terminus post quem* for the building’s first phase, whether or not it was actually used as a synagogue during this phase. The numismatic evidence from the synagogue area specifically gives 63 CE as a *terminus ante quem* for the synagogue and the Stone, in contrast to 67 CE for the surrounding marketplace area. My thanks go to Arfan Najar for discussing with me these issues surrounding the date of the building and its immediate context.
- ³ For the initial press release by the IAA, see: http://www.antiquities.org.il/article_eng.aspx?sec_id=25&subj_id=240&id=1601&module_id=#as (accessed on 20 May 2021); For the preliminary report by the site excavators, see (Avshalom-Gorni and Najar 2013); online: http://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=2304&mag_id=120 (accessed on 20 May 2021). For reports in other news venues, see, for example: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/09/world/middleeast/magdala-stone-israel-judaism.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=second-column-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&r=0> (accessed on 20 May 2021); <http://www.timesofisrael.com/at-magdala-by-the-kinneret-discoveries-that-resonate-with-jews-and-christians/> (accessed on 20 May 2021); <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/12/13/is-this-stone-the-clue-to-why-jesus-was-killed.html> (accessed on 20 May 2021); and <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/unearthing-world-jesus-180957515/?no-ist> (accessed on 20 May 2021) (which includes an interview of Rina Talgam); and (Aviam 2013b, pp. 205–20).
- ⁴ (Aviam 2013a, pp. 159–69; Aviam 2013b; Aviam 2014, pp. 132–42 (each of Aviam’s publications basically repeats the same information and interpretation); Bauckham 2015, pp. 113–35; Binder 2014, pp. 17–48; Charlesworth 2013, pp. 173–217 (at 190); and Notley 2014, pp. 141–57 (esp. 151–57); Hachlili 2013, pp. 40–41).
- ⁵ In the same volume: Newman (2020) and Doering (2020).
- ⁶ However, in 2017, distinguished scholar of ancient Jewish art and archaeology, Steven Fine, published his tentative interpretation of the Magdala Stonestone, including also an assessment of the contemporary religious and media contexts of its discovery and reporting (see Fine 2017).
- ⁷ Archaeologists and interpreters have all recognized that the most important—and clearly visible—decoration on the Stone is the seven-branched menorah. This particular menorah is fascinating not only because it represents one of the earliest depictions of the temple vessel in general, but also because it is the earliest example of a menorah found specifically within a synagogue setting. Relevant to the current study is L.Y. Rahmani’s statement that, “Representations of menorot from before 70 CE ... must be associated with the Temple priesthood, for whom the seven-branched menorah seems to have been an emblem” (Rahmani 1994, p. 51). The close connection of menoroth to priesthood is supported by our few but very important material sources: a Mattathias Antigonus coin from ca. 40–37 BCE, on which Mattathias is identified as “high priest and king,” has a menorah stamped on one side (see Meshorer 1982, pp. 87–94 and plate 54; Hachlili 2001, pp. 41–42); a menorah incised on a plaster fragment from the late Second Temple period was found on a wall in the priestly housing complex in Jerusalem’s Herodian Quarter (see Avigad 1989, pp. 46–47); and a fragment of a stone sundial etched with a seven-branched menorah was found among pre-70 remains during excavations on the Temple Mount.
- ⁸ See (Aviam 2013b, p. 209). The excavators have now changed their opinions and agree with Aviam’s analysis. Aviam diverges from the excavators’ original comments in a number of places. For example, the inside of the arches on the arcades of both side panels are another row of arches rather than sheaves of corn, the hanging circular objects within the first arch of each side panel is an incense vessel rather than a Herodian oil lamp, and the two images flanking the rosette on the Stone’s face are incense shovels rather than palms (pp. 212, 214–15). The interpretation of these elements is not significant for my overall argument in this study.
- ⁹ See 1 Kgs 6: 23–28; 7: 23–37; 8: 6–8; 2 Chron 3: 10–13; 4: 3–4.
- ¹⁰ See Reynolds (2008, pp. 42–43) on critical issues regarding the relationship of 1 En. 37–69 and 70–71.
- ¹¹ See (Klawans 2006, p. 136; Newsom 1985, pp. 51–58). The book of Ezekiel was clearly an important text at Qumran, as not only the influence of Ezekiel’s Merkavah on 4qShirShabb suggests but also in the explicit and thorough reworking of Ezekiel’s vision in five copies of 4qPseudo-Ezekiel (4Q385 [4QpsEzek^a], 4Q385c [4QpsEzek^c], 4Q386 [4QpsEzek^b], 4Q388 [4QpsEzek^d], 4Q391 [4QpsEzek^e]). Scroll information is from DSSSE.
- ¹² Elior’s work shares some similarity here; however, she does not treat the book of Daniel. The great influence of Ezekiel’s vision is also seen in that it went on to have a major impact within later Jewish and Christian art and biblical interpretation. See, e.g., the essays in Joyce and Mein (2011).

- ¹³ T. Levi 5:1 (cf. ALD 4:6 [4qLevi^b i 2]) reads: καὶ ἤνοιξέ μοι ὁ ἄγγελος τὰς πύλας τοῦ οὐρανοῦ· καὶ εἶδον τὸν ναὸν τὸν ἅγιον, καὶ ἐπὶ θρόνου δόξης τὸν ὕψιστον (“Additionally, the angel opened to me the gates of heaven, and I saw the holy sanctuary and the Most High upon a throne of glory”). Note, however, that God’s throne is not described as a chariot having wheels.
- ¹⁴ See Halperin (1988, p. 80) n. 15 on relevant text-critical issues for 1 En. 14: 19–20.
- ¹⁵ Note that the “wheels” of 1 En. 61: 10 and 71: 7—the “Ophannin”—are an angelic category here, alongside Seraphin and Cherubin.
- ¹⁶ (Fletcher-Louis 2007, pp. 57–79 (here 58–59)). This is an idea that Fletcher-Louis has developed in a number of his publications. For support of the notion of an eschatological Yom Kippur with similar accompanying priestly figures in ancient Judaism, see Orlov (2011, pp. 27–46). One of the earliest and clearest examples of a priestly interpretation of the Danielic son of man comes from Rev. 1: 13–16, where John the Seer presents Jesus as the son of man clothed in a “long robe” (ποδήρης), a characteristic feature of the high priest’s clothing (see Exod 25: 7; 28: 4, 31; 29: 5; 35: 9; Zech 3: 4; Wis 18: 24; Sir 46: 8; Ep. Arist. 96). See also (Reynolds 2008, pp. 82, 85; Halperin 1988, p. 526 n. (a)).
- ¹⁷ This observation appears to be why Bauckham sees the Stone and its symbolism as thoroughly embedded within “common Judaism” (Bauckham 2015, p. 131) rather than representative of any particular Jewish group.
- ¹⁸ Freyne (1980). The bibliography on Galilee research is too large to list here. For surveys, see Freyne (2007, pp. 13–29; Deines 2008, pp. 271–320; Fiensey and Strange 2014–2015).
- ¹⁹ For a full analysis of John 6: 22–71 from the cultural perspective of the Magdala synagogue stone, see (Cirafesi Forthcoming). On the notion that John 6: 59 is a reference to Capernaum’s public “synagogue” understood as both a building and a formal institution, see Cirafesi (2021).

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