

Boaz Huss. *Mystifying Kabbalah: Academic Scholarship, National Theology, and New Age Spirituality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 200 pp. ISBN: 9780190086961.

This quite agile volume might not have the intimidating presence of Edward Said's famous and prominent *Orientalism*, but it certainly follows in its footsteps, especially as it intends to expose the cultural premises and historical shortcomings behind the foundation of the study of the Kabbalah. Despite his agreeable tone, Dr. Boaz Huss has taken a clear position in the study of the Kabbalah from an unusual and yet quite resolute point of view: the history of historiography. In many respects, this monograph is a frank mapping of Jewish studies in Israel and abroad. However, if one reads it carefully enough, it is possible to reconstruct the emergence of the historiography of Jewish mysticism streaming out from the *Urvater* of Jewish mysticism—the famous Gershom Scholem.

While it once was a sort of erudite niche for overlearned scholars, the history of historiography has shown its potential for years, especially with the aftermath of post-structuralism and its claim for revising the “narratives,” “big narratives,” and “meta-narratives”—in short, questioning the very presuppositions of its own “narrativism.” The history of historiography has transformed itself into a true meta-historical investigation on the nature of the presuppositions that guide an academic field in the first place. In this respect, the question of Jewish mysticism cannot avoid asking, by misquoting a famous novel, what we talk about when we talk about Jewish mysticism. Thus, it is not incidental that Huss devotes several pages to questioning the vocabulary for Jewish mysticism—shall it be called “tradition” (*qabbalah*), “mysticism” (*mistorin*) or “mysticism” (*mystiqah*)?

Huss goes on to condense into a few chapters and relatively few pages—only 159, if one excludes the substantial bibliographical apparatus at the end—a clear and intelligent introduction to the study of the Kabbalah that puts into question two fundamental premises: 1) the assumption that mysticism is a

general religious experience, and 2) the idea that the divine is a causal factor in past and contemporary societies. Huss substantiates his criticism in two claims. His first claim “is directed against the prevalent assumption, according to which one must catalogue and explain these reports as expressions of a universal mystical experience” (4). This implies the second claim to guide his discussion: “The modern concept of mysticism, as well as its use as an analytic category, entails theological assumptions that govern the way scholars study and interpret the social and cultural phenomena labeled as mysticism” (5).

Chapter one introduces “the modern concept of mysticism” and shows the influence of German culture on the works of Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem in assessing the existence of Jewish mysticism out of Christian premises (9–34). Chapter two explores the intricacies between “Jewish Mysticism and National Theology” as it especially shows the role that the study of Jewish mysticism would allegedly have for reinvigorating the notion of Jewish identity in the contemporary world (35–61). Chapter three offers an insight into “the new age of Kabbalah research” and the progressive assimilation of “New Age spirituality” into contemporary Kabbalistic movements (62–101). Chapter four examines “the rejection of the occult” in contemporary Kabbalah through a comparative perspective (102–31). Finally, chapter five examines the “case study” of Abraham Abulafia in contemporary Kabbalah and questions Moshe Idel’s famous distinction between theosophic and ecstatic Jewish mysticism (132–60).

In only five relatively short chapters, Huss challenges the subtly biased origin of the notion of “Jewish mysticism,” the German romantic allure of the notion of “mysticism,” and the persuasion that “Jewish mysticism” should eminently be Jewish as if it should only be clarified by means of the Kabbalah itself. All these three assumptions were, more or less explicitly, instrumental to not only establishing the academic field of the study of the Kabbalah but also elaborating a specific narrative on Jewish national identity—exactly because Jewish mysticism was emerging as a cultural and religious blueprint for examining the historical

evolution of the Jewish people. In other terms, if one wants to express this in Foucauldian terms, the foundation of the academic field of Jewish mysticism also implied the foundation of a specific discourse—its normativity and power.

Huss further allows the reader to appreciate both the cultural question of Jewish identity vis-à-vis other religions—or religious experiences—and the political issues that are latent to the study of Jewish mysticism. As eloquently anticipated in the subtitle of this monograph, “academic scholarship” is never independent from the question of “National theology”—if not even of “national political theology”—but inextricably connected to it. In this respect, Huss is only evoking the implication between the exhaustion of traditional Zionism and the emergence of “New Age spirituality” that is imbued with notions of traditional Jewish mysticism and yet somehow profoundly different from what Gershom Scholem—the “father” of the modern study of Jewish mysticism—originally had in mind.

Huss argues that Scholem’s claim to creating an entirely new discipline evoked, either sarcastically or inadvertently, the act of Creation itself, stating that “the assertion that Scholem created the research of Kabbalah *ex nihilo* (based on his own words) is frequently repeated among scholars of Jewish studies” (50). (Whether this self-definition is ironic or sarcastic is a deep question that one should probably ask himself, sooner or later.) And yet, this monograph is alien from any psychoanalytical complex towards the *Urvater* of Jewish mysticism studies. Instead, Huss embarks on “a genealogical study and critical examination of the concept and research field of Jewish mysticism” (3), and simply situates Scholem within a larger tradition of religious studies. He even goes so far as to argue for the virtual suppression of a dedicated field of study: “I do not think there is a need to dedicate a unique field of research to the study of ‘Jewish mysticism’ nor to find a new concept or a different discipline under which to study the phenomena labeled as such” (159).

Broadly speaking, Huss himself is an important exponent of the third generation of scholars after the modern foundation of the field of Jewish mysticism by Scholem. As such, he provides an unbiased but also disenchanting

insight into the historiography of the Kabbalah that allows him to not indulge in the academic idiosyncrasies that affect some of the second-generation scholars who, say, cannot tolerate the intrusion of gender studies in the field of Jewish mysticism. In this respect, this monograph is short—perhaps too short—but resolute in advocating a fresh, more penetrant insight into the study of Jewish mysticism, and particularly in putting into question its main presuppositions. This is only possible by a sort of “post-structuralist” stance: by mobilizing notions from different fields such as comparative religion, psychology, and esotericism. While stretching beyond the ordinary boundaries of his discipline, Huss never intends to expropriate Jewish mysticism from its own nature—one would even say from its ethnically Jewish one—but he is rather eager to show that its historiographical shortcomings emerge from naively accepting biased presuppositions that are deeply rooted in this academic field.

Huss might not speak his opinion too loudly, but he does ask for a different manifesto that might allow for greater exploration of the deep connections between politics, religion, and spirituality. In that respect, this monograph should inspire anyone in the field to take part in reinvigorating that “religious factor” that, in the pace of Scholem and his German post-Romantic idiosyncrasies, could even take quite different steps than expected.

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