

*Jewish Mysticism: From Ancient Times through Today*

In his 2020 book, *Jewish Mysticism: From Ancient Times through Today*, Marvin A. Sweeney provides an important academic study of the history of Jewish mystical thought. He begins in Egypt, Canaan, and Mesopotamia with theophanies that involve “seeing and hearing G-d,” and he describes Jewish mysticism, currently in its 58th century, (p.405) as being “fundamentally concerned with understanding the presence of the divine in relation to the world of creation.”

Sweeney moves quickly but with germane detail through the “visionary and dream experiences” in the Pentateuch, which begin with the vision of “Abram” and his covenant obligation with “YHWH” and move through every instance of mysticism written in the Torah, as well as the Former and Latter Prophets, the apocalyptic and Heikhalot literature, and into the early Zohar, Lurianic Kabbalah, and the modern forms of Hasidism.

Throughout the book, the author provides crucial historical context that accompanied (and possibly caused) the various significant changes that occurred within Jewish thought and mystical practice from antiquity through the present age. Sweeney asserts that contact with G-d through dream visions was common through the classical age when Jewish thought held G-d as fully transcendent; outside of themselves. After the fall of the second temple in 70 A.D. and the Roman genocide of Jews in 135 A.D., Jewish thought began to enter into a more esoteric stage that still considered G-d to be transcendent, but they began to understand G-d as also existing immanently within themselves with the Heikhalot literature of the Talmudic Period (70-638 C.E.) and the early Middle Ages.

Sweeney’s scholarship assumes a high degree of biblical fluency on the part of the reader as he moves rather swiftly through the complex material, and his discussion of the “Ein Sof” of the

Zohar and the discussion of the hidden dimensions of the ten “Sefirot” or emanations within the Sefer Yetzirah may completely baffle new students. Therefore, this book may not be an appropriate entry point into the subject of Jewish mysticism for many students. Yet Sweeney’s treatment of the often violent impact of history upon the evolution of Jewish thought is both commendable and immediately useful to students of the perennial philosophy, for he describes how many Jews view themselves (and possibly all of humanity) as partners with G-d in the task of Tikkun Olam, the Repair of the World, which would “bring to an end the exile of G-d from the world and the exile of Judaism from Jerusalem and the land of Israel, thereby ushering in the Messianic Age in which G-d, Judaism, and creation would be sanctified and restored.”

1. Sweeney, Marvin A. *Jewish Mysticism: From Ancient Times through Today*. Grand Rapids, Michigan William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020.

<https://www.amazon.com/Jewish-Mysticism-Ancient-Times-through/dp/0802864031>.