Jody A. Barnard

The Mysticism of Hebrews: Exploring the Role of Jewish Apocalyptic Mysticism in the Epistle to the Hebrews

Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/331


Carl Mosser
University of Notre Dame
South Bend, Indiana

The stated intent of Jody Barnard’s book is to supply a “thorough exploration of how exactly and to what extent Hebrews absorbs, appropriates and modifies the various aspects of Jewish apocalyptic mysticism, and whether or not, and the extent to which, the author and his community may be described as mystics” (20–21). The book is perhaps better described as an attempt to establish the thesis that Hebrews is a mystagogical text written to facilitate communal mystical experiences by the recipients. Barnard’s main proposal can be summarized as follows.

According to Barnard, the author and recipients of Hebrews are “mystically oriented” (5). The recipients, however, have grown lax in their commitments. In response, the author reminds them of mystical experiences they have had in the past and exhorts them to engage in practices that will allow renewed participation in the heavenly angelic liturgy while still on earth. Toward this end, Heb 1–10 describes various heavenly realities that have been made accessible by Jesus in his high priestly role; Heb 10–13 then reminds recipients of their responsibility to access those realities and function as priests themselves in the heavenly liturgy (86). Hebrews, then, is “a powerful and relentless exhortation to approach the heavenly throne and diligently engage in a communal mysticism” whereby recipients may “restore their spiritual vitality” (211). The author “addressed the readers’ deepest needs by providing a solid basis for a substantial mystical
experience of God and his Son in the heavenly sanctuary” (212). Hebrews, then, is an “early Christian expression of Jewish apocalyptic mysticism” (282, 284). More specifically, it is a sermon with a “mystagogical function” (284). These conclusions lead Barnard to speculate that the author was a senior member of the recipients’ community who “was accustomed to leading the community in their exposition of sacred texts and mystical experience of the divine, but in his absence, a letter had to suffice” (283). The text was intended “as a kind of guide to heavenly ascent and transformation” in preparation for a sacred assembly (284; cf. 197).

Chapter 1 addresses standard introductory questions about Hebrews. Special attention is paid to the long-standing debate about the author’s background of thought. Barnard observes that scholars seem fairly evenly divided between Platonism and apocalypticism. He favors the latter. He then notes that scholars occasionally identify parallels between Hebrews and mystical themes in hekhalot and merkabah literature, especially with regard to a celestial temple. Hebrews specialists tend not to attribute significance to these parallels because this literature dates so much later than Hebrews. However, it has connections with Second Temple Jewish apocalypses at precisely this point. Proceeding from this basis, a few scholars have explored the role of apocalyptic and mystical traditions in Hebrews, but a thorough study of the issue remains a desideratum. Barnard seeks to address this need.

Subsequent chapters are grouped into three parts, each with its own introduction and conclusion. The introduction to part 1 (25–28) distinguishes Jewish apocalyptic mysticism from other forms of mysticism. Barnard identifies its chief feature as concern with unio liturgica (liturgical communion with angels in heaven), unio angelica (the angelification of humans), and the immediate experience of heavenly realities through visions, revelatory dreams, and ascent. The two chapters in part 1 introduce readers to the major literary sources and themes Barnard will later draw upon in his attempt to demonstrate that Hebrews is the product of Jewish apocalyptic mysticism.

Chapter 2 surveys several Jewish apocalypses and related texts. Barnard briefly sketches each text’s content and identifies some of the critical issues with which interpreters must wrestle. The texts in view are the Book of the Watchers (1 En. 1–36), Book of the Luminaries (1 En. 72–82), 2 Enoch, the Apocalypse of Abraham, the Testament of Abraham, the Testament of Levi, the Apocalypse of Zephaniah, 3 Baruch, and Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice. Though frequently cited in subsequent chapters, 2 Baruch, 4 Ezra, and Jubilees are omitted from this survey without explanation. Chapter 3 highlights key themes found in these texts, such as the celestial temple, multiple heavens, heavenly ascent, angelic priesthood and liturgy, the anthropomorphic appearance of God, the divine throne, and glory. It ends with an all-too brief discussion of the relationship
between apocalyptic literature and mystical experience (82–83). These chapters provide a generally reliable overview that demonstrates solid command of the secondary literature. They also helpfully collate numerous references to the primary literature related to the highlighted themes.

The four chapters in part 2 focus on Hebrews’ depiction of heavenly realities and their accessibility to worshipers on earth. Chapter 4 discusses the heavenly sanctuary. Here Barnard enters the fray over whether Hebrews presupposes a Platonic or apocalyptic worldview. He begins by addressing claims made about the alleged significance of Hebrews’ use of σκηνή (tent/tabernacle) rather than ἱερόν or ναός (temple). He demonstrates that these terms and their Hebrew equivalents are frequently interchangeable in Jewish (including Christian) literature of the period. Thus, it “is reasonable to maintain the same kind of continuity between tabernacle and temple in Hebrews as in Second Temple Judaism generally” (90). Though superfluous, Barnard speculates that the absence of explicit temple language may be an accommodation to Jewish sensitivities regarding the status of the temple or because the temple no longer existed. The rest of the chapter argues that Hebrews’ references to the heavenly sanctuary reflect apocalyptic rather than Platonic assumptions. Barnard patiently interacts with recent interpreters who attempt to revive Platonic readings, and his critique is convincing.

The first half of chapter 5 discusses texts that include depictions of angels as heavenly priests, an eschatological Yom Kippur, priestly messianism, and Melchizedek speculation. In light of these possible antecedents, the second half of the chapter examines Hebrews’ earliest allusions to high priestly Christology. Barnard presents an exegesis of 1:3–15 that convincingly shows that the author understood the Son’s investiture as high priest to have taken place in heaven. Furthermore, the author presupposed the Son’s heavenly ascent and some kind of transformation that allows him to fulfil this role. Chapter 6 proceeds in similar fashion, employing apocalyptic texts that depict God’s heavenly throne and glory to shed light on Hebrews’ reference to the Son’s heavenly enthronement (1:3) and inheritance of the divine name (1:4). Barnard contends that these verses depict Jesus as the divine Name-bearing anthropomorphic Glory of God. Part 2 culminates in chapter 7 with an examination of eight passages in Hebrews that Barnard takes to refer to either past religious experiences of the author and his community or experiences in which the author wants his readers to participate (2:1–4; 3:1; 4:3; 4:14–16; 6:4–6; 6:19–20; 10:19–25; 12:22–24). According to Barnard, these experiences “are frequently articulated in mystical terms” and “testify to the presence of mystical experiences among the author and his community” (211).
With part 2 Barnard takes himself to have presented “compelling evidence” that the community that gave rise to Hebrews embodied a form of late Second Temple apocalyptic mysticism that involved participation in mystical experiences such as visions and heavenly ascents (see 270). In part 3 Barnard reexamines the catena of quotations in Heb 1:5–13. Chapter 8 discusses the state of scholarship on this interpretive crux. Barnard argues that intertextual approaches fail adequately to explain the author’s rhetorical use of his Old Testament source material. He observes that the quotations in the catena are not presented as quotations from the prophets or scripture but as direct divine speech set in the heavenly realm. Chapter 9 works through each quotation to show how that the author employs them to make claims that resonate with prominent themes in Jewish apocalyptic mysticism. Barnard contends that the author’s selection and use of Old Testament texts in the catena were guided primarily by his own mystical experiences and only secondarily by intertextual considerations (see 216). The author does not comment upon scripture as much as comment with scripture (see 236). Phraseology from the Jewish scriptures was appropriated to report what the author heard and saw in mystical ascent to heaven: “these scriptural texts were suitable vehicles for expressing what was witnessed in apocalyptic dreams and visions and mystical experiences of unio liturgica” (271). In chapter 10 Barnard concludes the book with a summary of conclusions.

The Mysticism of Hebrews presents a novel and intriguing hypothesis. In a book such as this there are, of course, many exegetical conclusions one might dispute while still finding one’s self persuaded by the overall argument. However, the basic forms of argument Barnard employs and key premises upon which they depend are so problematic that this reviewer was not.

First, the logical form of the book’s main argument and many supplemental arguments does not appear to be valid. The book’s structure suggests the following argument:

1. Apocalypses and related texts are the products of mystical experience.
2. P, Q, R, etc. are motifs, terms, or images attested in apocalyptic and/or related literature.
3. P, Q, R, etc. appear in Hebrews.
4. Therefore, Hebrews is most probably the product of mystical experience.

Supporting arguments are typically structured along these lines but with the first premise suppressed:

1. [Apocalypses and related texts are the products of mystical experience.]
2. P is a motif, term, or image attested in apocalyptic and/or related literature.
3. P appears in this passage from Hebrews.
4. Therefore, this passage probably reflects mystical experience.

However, one gets the sense that the reasoning motivating Barnard’s proposal really goes something like this:

1. Apocalypses and related texts are the products of mystical experience.
2. If Hebrews is the product of Jewish apocalyptic mysticism, then we should find that it shares motifs, terms, and images with apocalyptic and related texts.
3. Hebrews does share motifs, terms, and images with apocalyptic and related texts.
4. Therefore, Hebrews is the product of Jewish apocalyptic mysticism.

The second formulation of the main argument straightforwardly affirms the consequent and is thus invalid. Though stated in probabilistic terms, the first formulation seems to presuppose a tacit conditional that would make it invalid as well. The conditional goes something like this: if a piece of literature contains particular motifs, terms, or images characteristic of Jewish apocalyptic mysticism, then it is the product of Jewish apocalyptic mysticism. But even if this conditional is not presupposed, Barnard never explains how he assigns probabilities. There are several alternative hypotheses that could plausibly account for how the author of Hebrews came to employ motifs and themes shared with apocalyptic texts without positing heavenly ascents or mystical experiences to him or his community. For example, the author of Hebrews and the writers of apocalyptic texts could be indebted to common sources or traditions. Ideas and terminology that originated in apocalyptic texts (or in mystical experiences underlying them) could have entered into Judaism’s common theological vocabulary by the time Hebrews was written. It is also possible that the author of Hebrews had first-hand knowledge of apocalypses (whether those still extant or others now lost) that shaped his thought but that did not inspire him to engage in practices designed to generate the kinds of mystical experiences attributed to the heroes in these works. Barnard never presents evidence that demands a mystagogical explanation, and he never explains why these sorts of explanations are less probable than his proposal.

Second, Barnard’s argument frequently depends on a methodologically unrestrained appeal to parallels. Samuel Sandmel famously labeled extravagant appeals to parallels in order to bolster speculative claims about literary relationships between texts “parallelomania.” Barnard does not make claims about literary relationships. Instead, he cites parallels to establish speculative claims about the relationship texts have to a common type of mystical experience. As with the parallelomania Sandmel criticized, Barnard often highlights similarities while ignoring differences and rarely situates cited apocalyptic passages within their own contexts. Many alleged parallels are so general as to be vacuous. In several cases Barnard even goes so far as to claim that Hebrews reflects
apocalyptic mysticism because it employs the same basic verbs of motion that are found in apocalyptic narratives (187, 241). That said, his shotgun approach does produce a few parallels that are genuinely illuminating, though not always for the reasons Barnard claims.

Third, the basic premise on which the entirety of Barnard’s case rests is speculative and overstated. Barnard cites several scholars who suggest that interpreters should consider the possibility that individual apocalypses may contain material derived from their authors’ mystical experiences. That is sound advice. On a case-by-case basis it may be reasonable to conclude that an apocalyptic text is (in part or whole) a literary expression of its author’s mystical experiences, but only if specific features of the text point in this direction. However, Barnard believes that “in all likelihood the apocalypses are rooted in and informed by genuine mystical experience” (83). This seems to apply to all early Jewish and Christian apocalypses in toto. He also presumes that any mystical praxis or experience attributed to the hero of an apocalypse can be attributed to the text’s actual author. While it is reasonable to conclude occasionally that an author has inscribed his experience into the experience of a character in his narrative, it is not reasonable to suppose that this is typically what apocalypses do. We are on safer ground if we begin with the general assumption that experiences attributed to prophets, scribes, and seers from the distant past are fictional, the product of the author’s imagination or speculation. They are typically literary devices whereby their authors creatively address theological conundrums, polemicize against opponents, clarify exegetical difficulties in the biblical text, bolster the authority of their halakic practices, speculate about the heavenly realm, explain the origin of evil, and so forth.

Fourth, in half a dozen places Barnard suggests a distinct epistemological argument in support of his proposal that strikes me as naïve. Its most concise expression takes the form of a rhetorical question: “How could the author even describe the exalted Jesus in the way he does without implying some claim to mutual first-hand knowledge of heavenly realities?” (178). Elsewhere Barnard claims that Hebrews’ description of the Son’s enthronement “implies knowledge of heavenly realities” (156, 215; see also 218, 237, 271). This knowledge, Barnard supposes, could only derive from veridical heavenly ascent and visionary experiences. This is the same assumption that he seems to make about the apocalypses in general. As with them, there are several alternate, less speculative explanations that Barnard does not consider. The one alternative he does address is the common supposition that the author’s belief that the Son is enthroned in heaven is derived from a christological reading of Ps 110:1. Barnard’s response is to ask if it is not “equally plausible that mystical experiences of the resurrected Jesus, which confirmed certain Jesus traditions (e.g. Mark 8:38), led to the exalted Christology of the earliest Christians, which was then expressed with the aid of Psalm 110:1 and other scriptural
texts” (273). The answer to that question is no; it is not an equally plausible explanation, at least if we are meant to attribute this process to the author of Hebrews. Evidence from the Pauline corpus and possibly Acts shows that the imagery of Ps 110:1 was already deeply embedded within widely circulating christological traditions and that citing the text was already a commonplace by the time Hebrews was written.

*The Mysticism of Hebrews* is clearly organized and well-written. It presents several exegetical observations worthy of consideration. Relevant secondary literature is summarized with admirable concision. However, for the reasons discussed above, among others, the book’s novel proposal is unconvincing.