

Princeton University

Honors Faculty Members
Receiving Emeritus Status



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Peter Schäfer



Peter Schäfer is the leading scholar of rabbinic Judaism and early Jewish mysticism in the world today. His impact on Jewish studies in Germany, Israel, and the United States has been enormous. Peter was born in Germany in 1943, and with the exception of two years at Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1964-66), his education took place there. He completed his doctorate in 1968 at the University of Freiburg and his habilitation in 1973 at the University of Frankfurt. He taught at the University of Tübingen, the University of Cologne, and finally, from 1983, at the Free University of Berlin, where he continued to teach one semester a year for several years after his arrival in Princeton in 1998 to serve as the first Ronald O. Perelman Professor of Jewish Studies in the Department of Religion and Program in Judaic Studies. He has served as director of the Program in Judaic Studies since 2005.

If the field of early Jewish mysticism looks very different today from the way it looked as late as 1980, it is because of Peter's foundational contribution. Until then, most of the corpus of hekhalot texts had been available to scholars only in the editions used by mystically minded traditional Jews, often from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By the late 1970s, a few attempts at critical editions had appeared or were in preparation. But critical editions are based on the assumption that there existed an original form of the text that could be recovered, at least in theory, by careful consideration of the evidence. Peter argued that the critical edition was not an appropriate scholarly tool for the hekhalot literature since the variation from manuscript to manuscript suggested that there was no original form; rather, the texts had been composed from units that were gathered together and arranged somewhat differently in different manuscripts. To do justice to this textual situation, Peter chose to present the manuscripts synoptically, that is, in parallel columns lined up as far as possible to allow the reader to see what each manuscript

includes, what it omits, and how the different manuscripts treat the same basic unit of text. The decades since the publication of the *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (1981) have seen a dramatic growth in scholarship on the hekhalot literature, made possible by Peter's innovative approach to editing these works.

Peter's work has also reshaped the way we understand the significance of the hekhalot literature and its place in the history of Judaism and Jewish mysticism. The standard reading of the hekhalot literature had been that of Gershom Scholem, the great founder of the scholarly study of Jewish mysticism. For Scholem, the central theme of the hekhalot literature was heavenly ascent, which, conveniently for his purposes, made the hekhalot literature look more mystical than magical; he did not give much attention to the spells for the invocation of angels. Peter's work addresses the relationship between the invocations of angels and the instructions for ascent and argues cogently against Scholem and his followers that the ascents should not be understood as mystical testimonies by pointing to the value these texts place on the act of reciting the accounts of ascent. Peter's recent history of early Jewish mysticism, which covers more than a millennium, from the prophet Ezekiel through the Dead Sea Scrolls, the apocalypses of the Second Temple period, and the middle Platonism of Philo of Alexandria, to rabbinic speculation about Ezekiel's divine chariot and, finally, the hekhalot texts, makes a compelling case against Scholem's claim for continuity between these earlier phenomena and Kabbalah, the classical Jewish mysticism of the Middle Ages.

Peter's early work in rabbinic literature, the other central interest throughout his career, consists of studies of aspects of rabbinic thought, a standard scholarly concern of the 1970s, when they were written, though they stand out for Peter's unusually penetrating analysis. But in the 1980s, Peter came to apply his insights into the composition history of the hekhalot literature to rabbinic texts, raising fundamental questions about the units and "macroforms" of the classical rabbinic corpus. The multivolume synoptic edition of the Jerusalem Talmud (1991-2001) does for this work what the *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* did for the hekhalot corpus. More recently, Peter has

become one of the leaders in the recent scholarly discussion of the complex relationship between the rabbis and Christianity. His work has demonstrated both that the rabbis were far more conversant with Christian texts than most scholars had thought and that the contours of rabbinic Judaism reflect to a considerable extent the rabbis' efforts to define themselves in relation to Christianity.

Peter's contributions to Jewish studies go beyond traditional publications. In the last decade, he has conceived and overseen the development of two important websites that bring the insights embodied in his synoptic editions into the electronic age through the efforts of teams of specialists in different areas. One website makes available the manuscripts of *Sefer Hasidim*, the most important work of the German Pietists of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, allowing scholars to compare portions of different manuscripts online. The second website, still under development, will perform a similar function for the *Toldot Yeshu*, the Life Story of Jesus, an interrelated body of Jewish texts from late antiquity and beyond that parody the gospels' account. The success Peter has achieved in these collaborative enterprises is still unusual in the humanities, and it provides a model for future endeavors.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of Peter's contribution to Jewish studies at Princeton and beyond is the extraordinary energy and imagination he has brought to arranging conferences and colloquia on a variety of subjects: the Jerusalem Talmud in Greco-Roman culture, *Sefer Hasidim*, genizah magical texts, the state of the question in hekhalot studies, the early rabbinic midrash on the book of Genesis. Perhaps his most important contribution of this kind has been the series of conferences organized by graduate students, for which Peter has provided inspiration, supervision, and financial support. The conferences have not only given students valuable experience in the practical challenges of organizing an international conference but have also offered them the opportunity to give papers alongside scholars of international renown, which the organizers then publish in a series Peter edits. These publications have given more than one career an early boost.

Peter has been a devoted teacher of undergraduates as well as graduate students, and he has been an exemplary colleague, kind, helpful, and easy to work with—as long as no one schedules a meeting before 10 a.m. His colleagues and friends have no doubt that his retirement will be a productive one, but they will miss him terribly. While his principal residence will be in Berlin, they take some comfort that he will maintain an apartment here as well. It is hard to imagine Jewish studies at Princeton without him.