

Thoughts on James Davila's SBL Paper (Nov. 2011)

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James Davila presented a great paper at SBL on "Ritual Praxis in Ancient Jewish and Christian Mysticism." (Online here: <http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/divinity/media/JRD%20Ritual%20praxis%20paper%20SBL.pdf>) The paper raised a number of issues in my mind.

1- I think there is a fundamental methodological problem of distinguishing between authentic and fraudulent mysticism. (This is also a problem at an ontological level, but that's a different question.) We have ancient texts which make various claims about visions, ascents, etc. I distinguish four categories of claimed mystical experiences (ME) in these ancient texts.

Authentic = a person who had a real ME of God

Sincere = a person who sincerely believes they have had a real ME of God, but has not.

(Note that all authentic MEs are also sincere MEs.)

Fictional = a person who describes an overtly fictional mystical experience as an allegory, etc. (Note, fictional mystical experiences can have historical verisimilitude--that is, accurately describe the praxis and experience of sincere or authentic MEs.)

Fraudulent = a person who knowingly falsely claims to have had a real mystical experience of God in an attempt to convince others of the reality of his claims. (Note, all fraudulent MEs are also fictional; on the other hand fraudulent MEs can, and often do, also have historical verisimilitude.)

When faced with an ancient text it is often very difficult to establish methodological criteria that allow us to distinguish between authentic, sincere, fraudulent or fictional MEs. Yet, methodologically speaking I think it is of crucial importance to try to do so, and not conflate sincere mystical practices and experiences with fraudulent ones. (For example, Dante's *Divine Comedy* is a fictional description of mystical experiences, but is apparently based on sincere mystical experiences--his own and others. Likewise the Isis Book (11) in Apuleius's *Golden Ass* appears to be a fictionalization of real rituals and sincere MEs.)

2- This problem is reflected in Davila's suggested use of the Elizabethan English mage John Dee as a possible analogy for ancient practices. The problem here is that, while I believe John Dee was absolutely sincere in his MEs, it is quite possible that Edward Kelly, his medium, was in fact a fraud. If that was the case--and my judgment may be wrong--it is likely that most of the Enochian dialogues represent fraudulent rather than sincere mystical experiences. And, if so, it means their value for understanding sincere mystical experiences of antiquity is probably minimal, beyond the extent to which they may have historical verisimilitude--that is Kellyt consciously imitating his understanding of sincere MEs for the purpose of validating his fraud.

3- I think art is another possible category of evidence we should consider when examining mystical experiences. First, art may depict some forms of mystical praxis. (This is especially true of ancient Egyptian temple ritual, for example. Likewise, South and East Asia art is especially rich in depictions of mystical praxis.) Second, art may depict the actual mystical experiences. In this regard, some of the illustrated magical texts, bowls, etc. may be of interest, showing either what was done or what was seen by the mystics. Mani's *Picture Book (Ardahang)* may be of special interest in this regard, due to the claim that Mani painted pictures of some of his visions.¹

4- Davila suggests a cautious use of nineteenth and twentieth century magical-mystics as possible anthropological analogy to our ancient sources. In addition to the Dee-Kelly and the Golden Dawn mentioned by Davila, I would suggest examining Eliphas Levi's claim to have necromantically raised the spirit of Apollonius of Tyana in London in 1854,² and Aleister Crowley (a member of the Golden Dawn) who claims to have "channeled" Thoth, Horus, and other ancient Egyptian spirits in writing his *Liber AL vel Legis (Book of the Law)* in Egypt in

¹ See, for example, <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/ojs/index.php/transcultural/article/view/6173/2966>

² translated by A. Waite, *Mysteries of Magic: A Digest of the Writings of Eliphas Levi*, 2nd ed., 446-450. It can be read online at: http://www.theosophical.ca/siftings/volume_4/Siftings_V4_A17c.pdf

1904.³ It is possible that some of the pseudepigraphal mystical literature may have been written in a broadly similar manner, representing sincere visionary “resurrection” of lost books and prophetic visions of the ancients.

5- Finally, I would suggest that we attempt to engage living practicing mystics. They are often reluctant to openly discuss their beliefs and practices due to the fact that the secular academy often desacralizes the sacred. Nonetheless, there are Kabbalists and Christian mystics who claim to be living representatives of a mystical tradition that stretches back to the early mystical texts. I think it would be fascinating to try to organize an SBL panel or workshop and invite living traditional mystics to share their experiences and perspectives.

All in all, it was a great paper. Everything by James Davila is well worth reading. See his web site at: <http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/divinity/rt/staff/jrd4/>

³ L. Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of Aleister Crowley*, (2000) 117-134; Online at: http://www.thelema.org/aa/documents/the_book_of_the_law/index.html