

Zvi Mark. *The Scroll of Secrets: The Hidden Messianic Vision of R. Nachman of Breslav.* Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2010. 318 pp. \$49.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-934843-93-2; \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-934843-94-9.



Reviewed by Justin Jaron Lewis (University of Manitoba)

Published on H-Judaic (August, 2010)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

A Secret Messianic Vision Revealed

At the heart of this book is a vision of the Messiah as a healer, teacher, and master of song, who will bring the world to unity and peace—neither war nor struggle, in light of his beauty and their longing for him (p. 60). This vision, deeply appealing in war-weary Israel, where the Hebrew edition of this book appeared in 2006, is ascribed to Rebbe Nachman of Breslav, who died two hundred years ago this coming fall. Rebbe Nachman has received more scholarly attention than any other Hasidic master. His short life, and his teachings and stories, have been studied by an A-Z of leading lights in academia, from Arthur Green to Zvi Mark. This outpouring of scholarship has been matched by the publications of Breslav Hasidim themselves, beginning with the rebbe's disciple Rabbi Nathan of Nemirov. Steadfastly refusing to appoint a successor after their master's death, Breslavers have devoted themselves to printing and distributing writings by and about Rebbe Nachman.

Surprisingly, there have also been writings ascribed to Rebbe Nachman himself that were never printed. Indeed, these writings remained secret, unknown even to

most Breslav Hasidim. In the last several years, however, Mark has brought to light two hidden stories attributed to Rebbe Nachman, as well as the "Scroll of Secrets," which is the subject of this book.[1] Mark's discoveries surely justify Moshe Idel's call, some twenty years ago, for cooperation between scholars and mystics, academic scholars and traditionalist practitioners of Jewish spiritual traditions.[2] It is with the help of Breslav Hasidim that Mark was able to access, decode, and publish this Scroll.

This is not (contrary to prepublication rumors) the "burnt book" that Rebbe Nachman wrote and then ordered destroyed; apparently, that work was indeed burned to ashes. Rather, the Scroll consists of notes, ascribed to Rabbi Nathan of Nemirov, on two discourses by Rebbe Nachman about the coming of the Messiah. These notes were largely in "acronyms and abbreviations" (p. 24). There is no indication that Rabbi Nathan's original has survived, but Mark was able to access several different manuscript copies—none, by the way, actually in scroll form.

This Scroll occupies, in translation, only ten pages of Markâs book (also including photographs of one of the manuscripts). Even with the help of Breslav informants, Mark could not decipher all the abbreviations, and the English text is peppered with ellipses. The rest of the book consists of Markâs analysis of the history of the Scroll and its contents.

Frustratingly, a printed Hebrew text of the Scroll is not provided. (One translation error that can be reconstructed from Markâs footnotes is the rendition of the Yiddish expression *droshe-geshank* as âsermon giftâ [pp. 54-55]. Hasidic texts in Hebrew typically include many Yiddish terms, such as this one, which primarily means âwedding presents.â) This is a thin book; perhaps a future edition can be expanded to include the encrypted and decoded Hebrew texts. It could also include the âhidden talesâ of Rebbe Nachman previously published by Mark, which he often mentions.

Markâs commentary on the Scroll takes a number of different tacks, each thoughtful and noteworthy. He points out distinctive features of Rebbe Nachmanâs messianic vision, notably its nonviolence—which directly contradicts Maimonidesâ authoritative medieval definition of the Messiah as one âwho fights the wars of Godâ (p. 168). Likewise, the Jerusalem Temple (the focal point of politically dangerous messianic agitation in our own time) is not mentioned; its place seems to be taken by the person of the Messiah himself. Mark also explores influences that the Scroll, while still hidden from all but a few, may have had on two of the newer movements inspired by Rebbe Nachman, the Rav Schik group of Yavniel, and the Nanachs, each of which display unusual messianic fervor.

The scholarly debate over whether Rebbe Nachman saw himself, or is seen by Breslav Hasidim, as the Messiah is handled by Mark with refreshing nuance. He notes that apparent references to the rebbe as a messianic figure must be read in the context of Hasidic belief in the interrelationships and transmigrations of souls. Markâs conclusion—to be taken seriously in view of his familiarity with the literature and with todayâs Breslav communities—is that Rebbe Nachman is seen, at most, as the Messiah son of Joseph who, in some legendary traditions, dies while preparing the way for the final Messiah, son of David (p. 203). There are, nonetheless, many similarities between the messianic figure of the Scroll and Rebbe Nachmanâs self-presentation. Mark traces these connections through the less-hidden Breslav literature, in which nearly every idea and image in the Scroll can

be found (see especially pp. 155-157). Ironically, this aspect of Markâs careful work may leave readers wondering what all the fuss concerning the Scroll itself was about.

Mark goes some way toward answering this question in a thoughtful chapter on âThe Scroll as Esoterica.â Here, he explores ways in which, regardless of the Scrollâs content, its aura of secrecy has played a significant role in Breslav communities. This chapter is worth reading in conjunction with Hugh Urbanâs seminal *Economics of Ecstasy* (2001), which explores the functions of religious secrecy as a âdiscursive strategy,â which must be seen âin contrast to mere silence plain and simple.â[3] The choice of some Breslav Hasidim to abandon this time-hallowed strategy by cooperating with Mark was indeed a momentous decision. At the same time, some of them insisted âthat there is a real difference between ... knowing what is written in [the Scroll], and actually understanding its secret meaningâ—which perhaps remains as hidden as ever (p. 42).

However, Markâs own citations from Breslav literature leave room for doubt as to whether the material presented here really is the famous, mysterious secret scroll. Mark dismisses a tradition that the secret scroll spoke âof Russia and what would transpire until the coming of our redeemer and from then until the resurrection of the deadâ and about âa tree with golden leavesâ—since neither Russia, the resurrection of the dead, nor a golden-leaved tree are mentioned in the work Mark has translated (p. 297). He likewise dismisses a reference to the work translated here as âa shortened versionâ of the original secret scroll, though this strikes me as rather plausible (p. 278).

When my son and I participated in the annual Breslav pilgrimage to Rebbe Nachmanâs grave in Uman, Ukraine, on Rosh Hashanah 2007, the recent publication of Markâs Hebrew edition of this book was a topic of conversation. The Hasidim we spoke with were not unhappy about the publication of this secret material, but they were not eager to read it either: âNu, do we already understand the teachings of Rebbe Nachman that were *not* kept secret?â

Notes

[1]. The two hidden stories have been published in Hebrew. See Zvi Mark, âThe Tale of the Bread: A Hidden Story of R. Nahman of Braslav,â *Tarbiz* 72, no. 3 (2003): 415-452; and Zvi Mark, âThe Tale of the Armor: From the Hidden Chambers of Bratslav Censorship,â *Zion* 70, no. 2 (2005):191-216.

[2]. Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 25-27.

[3]. Hugh Urban, *Economics of Ecstasy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 213.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: Justin Jaron Lewis. Review of Mark, Zvi, *The Scroll of Secrets: The Hidden Messianic Vision of R. Nachman of Breslav*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. August, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30159>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.