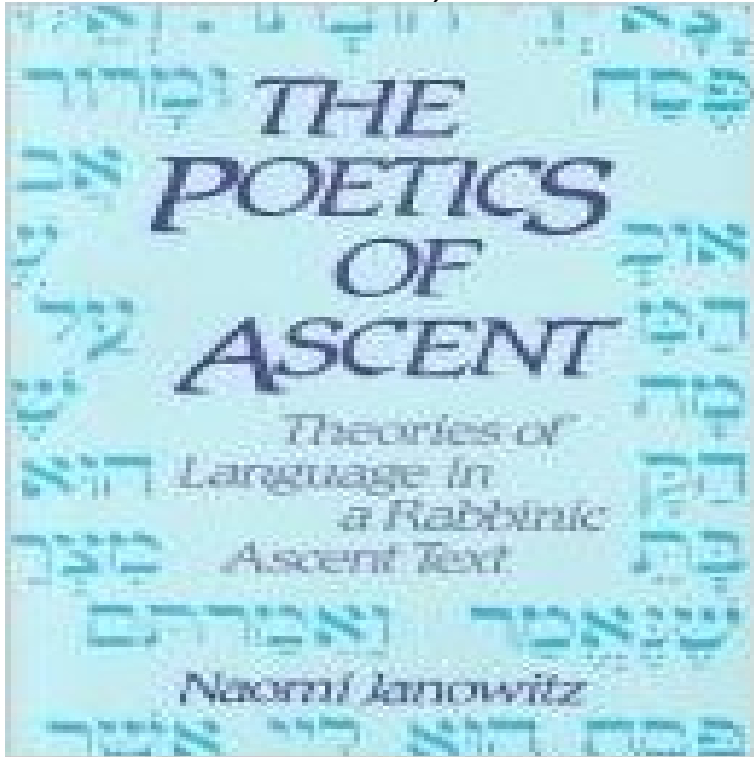


Poetics of Ascent: Theories of Language in a Rabbinic Ascent Text (S U N Y Series in Judaica)



The work incorporates an intelligent use of linguistic and anthropological categories to analyze a series of mystical texts. In this it is bold, innovative, and an original venture.

Janowitz is in control of the difficult source material and gives its structure and content new depth and analytical possibilities by virtue of the categories she uses for analysis. -- Michael Fishbane, Brandeis University

This book represents the first English translation of Maaseh Merkabah, which is part of a body of early Jewish mystical texts known as palace (hekhalot) or chariot (merkabah) texts. Through a complex dialogue, a rabbi-teacher reveals to his student the techniques of ascent, methods for traveling up through the heavens by means of recitation of hymns. The teacher gives vivid descriptions of the heavenly realm, filled with flaming chariots and a chorus of angels engaged in praising the deity. The emphasis in the text is on language, on the correct recitation of the words to achieve the ritual. The particular focus is on the divine Name, which can be employed in unusual ways. The author relates the structures of the text to the linguistic ideologies. The complex structures of the text begin to unfold in light of the theories about the ritual function of language. The hymns include praise of the deity and voces magicae, words that have no semantic meaning, but draw attention to sounds of letters in Gods name. Since Gods name is used to create the world, the sounds of the name are creative, but the Name cannot be spoken. The hymns create a multiplicity of Name-equivalents, words that have the functional status of the divine Name and which can be employed in ritual. Voces magicae are not so much nonsense as they are extensions of the linguistic theory. The final chapter surveys recent theories of ritual language and then uses the conclusions from the study to refine the general issue of the relationship between

the semantic meaning of words and their ritual efficacy. The dialogic structure of the text permits the reader to become the next student in a chain going back to the deity by means of Moses. This work utilizes a fresh semiotic approach to the mystical literature, which is a novelty in the study of Hekhalot literature. -- Moshe Idel, Hebrew University

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