

The Teaching of Esoteric Torah in the Doctrine of the Early Tosafists in Ashkenaz

Matania J. Ben-Ghedalia

Although, from the talmudic period onward, the rabbis refrained from public exposition of hidden matters and took care not to initiate the unworthy into esoteric knowledge, the definition of what should be hidden was not uniform among rabbinic authorities over the ages. This paper examines how the early Tosafists in Germany defined which matters were not to be taught to the general public but should rather be restricted to select individuals. Notably, however, not every topic that is currently defined as ‘mysticism’ was actually considered by the Tosafists to be esoteric. Moreover, even within the category of ‘esoteric’ varying degrees of compartmentalization were practiced. This paper identifies three main factors that shaped the attitude of these early Tosafists toward the dissemination of esoteric teachings – early rabbinic traditions, early Italian and Ashkenazi traditions, and Christian religious pressure – and examines how they navigated among these factors in fashioning their policy.