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To what extent may Qumran, the Essenes, and the Therapeutae be considered esoteric and secretive? In this book, Michael E. Stone sets forward the case, considering such issues as Qumran’s special terminology, social hierarchy, and apocalyptic and pseudepigraphic texts, in light of other examples from ancient Judaism and the Eastern Mediterranean. The bulk of the focus is on the Qumran group and the Essenes, while the discussion of the Therapeutae (in chapters 4 and 6) is naturally lighter by sheer comparison of available sources.

In chapter 1, “Secret Societies in Ancient Judaism,” Stone notes that the Dead Sea Scrolls, as insider (emic) sources, remain silent about the identity of the community. Citing similar studies in sociology and Qumran studies on etic/emic perspectives,[1] Stone discusses the inherent tensions in modern scholarly characterizations of ancient Jewish movements: heterodox and orthodox, variant and mainstream, sectarian and normative. Chapter 2, “‘Esoteric,’ Mysteries, and Secrecy,” explores terminology. Stone distinguishes between “esoteric” and “esotericism” (pp. 8-9), preferring the former category given that Antoine Faivre’s taxonomic definition of “esotericism” (*Access to Western Esotericism* [1994]) is more relevant to practices from the medieval period to the nineteenth century. Western esotericism includes Hermeticism, spiritualism, and kabbalism, and thus the “-ism” can be misleading in application to ancient models of the esoteric. Hence, Stone argues that the working definition of “esotericism” has led to some poor or incomplete imaginings of the esoteric in Hellenistic and Roman spheres. Evaluating this distinction, the choice seems arbitrary, but it does seem useful for taking a fresh approach. The methodological limits of prior (Western) scholarship on ancient esotericism and secret cults may be more to do with mirror-reading and orientalism but also limited use of evidence beyond the standard literary canons of biblical and classical studies. That being said, such methodological grievances may risk perpetuating or exacerbating the reification of language in the avoidance of terms and taxa (“-isms”), rather than deconstructing terms back into more manageable entities. As both “esoteric” and “esotericism” arguably conjure up imagery of the Occult, it is up to scholars to contextualize and demystify language, rather than always steering clear cautiously of words made tainted or objectionable by popularized usage.

The categories of the “esoteric” and “secrecy” as features of the Qumran community are appealing given the use of special terminology and practices, cryptic scripts, and apocalyptic teachings, and may even perhaps serve to explain the possi-
ble spoken use of Hebrew language at Qumran. Stone writes that “the Qumran covenants cultivated teaching and practice that were kept hidden, secret, and esoteric and were communicated to initiates in stages,” and argues strongly for the idea that Qumran literature was in its time deliberately concealed from outsiders (p. 24). Recent work by David J. Larsen on the Hodayot and 4Q381 supports Stone’s case. Stone’s theory of an esoteric, exclusive Qumran provokes an issue: to what degree are Qumran’s spiritual and revelatory claims of experience distinct from the realm of biblical prophecy? Likewise, how then is the apocalyptic impulse different from the esoteric? Stone discusses each of these distinctions. He reminds us of the additional, but highly significant, distinction between the esoteric and the pseudo-esoteric. In the latter category are texts within the apocalyptic or revelatory genre that enjoyed wider circulation despite drawing thematically upon the well of the esoteric, such as 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, and the Apocalypse of Abraham.

Chapter 3, “Esoteric as a Social Category,” explores what it means, and what it does not mean, to suggest that Qumran was an esoteric group. Stone discusses craft or professional trade secrecy, orality, and writtenness as transmitters of esoteric traditions and literary devices of pseudepigraphy. Stone considers those literary devices in pseudepigrapha aimed at asserting the work’s own written survival and plausibility to be within the scope of the pseudo-esoteric. Considering these strategies of self-authentication, Stone questions to what degree the creative depictions of apocalyptic, revelatory, mystical, or at least highly visualized religious experiences can be confidently categorized by modern commentators as mere literary device. Indeed, text-critical analysis can indirectly seem to downgrade spiritualizing experiences in texts to mere literary strategies. Therefore, Stone’s reflections should find fertile ground for discussion within the fields of apocalyptic and pseudepigraphic studies in ancient Judaism and Christianity.

Chapter 4, “The Social Organization of Secrecy,” explores the diverse religious expressions of Hellenistic and Roman periods in the Eastern Mediterranean. Stone notes that Hellenistic expressions of the sacred may in part be the result of wider syncretic cultural developments. The Essenes and Therapeutae, within such a historical context, can be arguably categorized as esoteric groups of Judaism at the time. Stone explores further nuanced distinctions between religious and scholastic secrecy, as well as between publicly known secret societies and secret secret societies, whose practices are completely unknown. Here there is a fine historical grip in Stone’s analysis, which makes room for the possibility of the unknown inherent in the study of the past, since our surviving evidence is often partial, skewed, or even both.

Stone argues that the dispute over identifying the Essenes and Qumran group could have been avoided if scholars were more attentive to insider/outsider perspectives. Since Stone points to the possibility of Hebrew use at Qumran in (perhaps) deliberate contrast to Aramaic use for (more widely circulated) scientific and astrological texts, one wonders whether the Hebrew-Aramaic distinction justifies a more inclusive Near Eastern orientation in terms of the choice of primary sources here. Stone’s inclusion of Hellenistic and Roman cults is well justified. It would have been useful to include Aramaic Jewish religious and magical texts in the Near Eastern Diaspora and Hellenistic Babylonian and late Egyptian cultic developments as part of the discussion alongside Greek and Roman contexts. However, this book already has a great deal of ground to cover, and
the amount of material surveyed here is already voluminous. Perhaps we just need to wait for the next book.

Chapter 5, “Initiation and Graded Revelation,” covers Josephus, Hippolytus, the Community Rule, and the Damascus Document. Through these ancient witnesses, Stone discusses features of esoteric groups, such as hierarchical structure, tripartite hierarchy, special clothing, graded initiation sequences, and inner/outer circles. Voluntary admission and self-separation do not seem to be due to direct Hellenistic-Greek influence but part of wider societal developments in the Hellenistic world. Chapter 6, “Other Secret Jewish Groups and Traditions,” treats magic and the Essenes, and hints at fruitful comparisons that are still to be made with rabbinic Judaism, particularly merkhaba and hekhalot texts. This chapter also analyzes, within Stone’s own exoteric/esoteric framework, the esoteric and pseudo-esoteric in 4 Ezra, Ben Sira (Sir 3:21-24), Jubilees, and 1 Enoch. Continuing the discussion, chapter 7, “The Social Setting of Esoteric Tradition,” further examines concepts that have a bearing upon the ancient Jewish esoteric, such as the Persian loanword raz in Daniel and Qumran literature, the notion of forbidden teachings, and narratives of preserved, transmitted, or sealed knowledge.

Chapter 8, “Circles Behind ... and Final Thoughts,” is a plea for sense. Stone notes the fashion of offhanded appeals to underlying circles and “scribal” audiences which are routinely constructed in scholarly studies because of text-oriented analysis, despite the same conversations critiquing the existence of named Jewish groups (Essenes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Therapeutae). As early Jewish texts increasingly are studied in isolation, and more doubt cast upon primary sources, the more numerous become conjectured audience-circles or “inferred groups” (p. 138). Ironically, these circles seem ever more diverse, intellectualized, and tolerant of each other, sanitized of any unseemly secrecy or religious-supernaturalism. These posited circles reign freely at present, and thus Stone argues we must first accept the existence of known named groups in ancient Judaism—some of whom, he has shown, were quite secretive in nature. Stone remarks that epigraphic, archaeological, and further textual analysis is necessary to give further shape to secret/hidden groups in ancient Judaism.

There are natural similarities between the challenges posed by Stone’s book and other evolving conversations in biblical/Jewish scholarship over the distinctions between magic and medicine, magic and liturgy, and the role of mysticism and supernatural experience in religion. This work is worthy of attention for a number of ongoing debates in the fields of Dead Sea Scrolls and Second Temple Judaism: the Qumran/Essene debate, Qumran self-identification, terminology, and the place of the Therapeutae, Essenes, and Qumran group within ancient Judaism as we understand it. Those who would benefit from the book include anyone interested in Qumran terminology, religious experience, magic, mysticism, concealed and revealed knowledge, apocalyptic and pseudepigraphic texts, and the social dynamics of Second Temple Judaism. Stone’s book reflects paradigm-shifting thinking, articulating clearly a phenomenal idea that deserves our attention.

Stone writes concisely and precisely, without methodological fireworks, and the book is therefore a pleasure to read. Bibliographic referencing, coverage, and overall structure are exemplary. Given its approachable style, this book would lend to fruitful debate in classrooms and should not be out of place on advanced student reading lists.

Notes


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