Part I

The Essenes in Ancient Literature
The nature of the Essenes attested in ancient literature was considered in scholarship long before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, since the Essenes appeared to be a mystery within the corpus of material about Judaism at the time of Jesus. However, it is important to note at the outset that the study of Judaism was, in Christian scholarship, dominated throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the paradigm of Pharisaic hegemony, in that the rabbis’ supposed antecedents, the Pharisees, were believed to have been the principal party that dictated law and governance. In addition, Christian scholarship portrayed the type of Judaism led by the Pharisees as narrow, rigid, legalistic, and unspiritual. Into this pre-formed notion of Second Temple Judaism the Essenes were inserted as a peculiar anomaly.

That Judaism was created as a foil to the Christian proclamation was already explored almost a century ago by George Foot Moore, who looked to Johan Andreas Eisenmenger, and his book *Entdecktes Judenthum*, published in 1700, as a damaging explication of Judaism that fitted a tendentious goal, namely the defamation of the Talmud and Jewish ‘superstitions’. Despite its intrinsic anti-Semitism, Eisenmenger’s work was republished as late as 1893. But more deeply rooted was the simple and repeated notion of a dominant ‘Pharisaic’ and unspiritual ‘legalism’ within Judaism: rabbinic material was read back into Second Temple times, and then it was interpreted to indicate a severe construction that fitted into the Lutheran dichotomy of ‘faith’ versus ‘works of the law’. In short, the presentation of Judaism was founded on the underlying understanding that Judaism was antithetical to Christianity.

---

The scholarly analysis of the Essene question from its post-Renaissance beginnings to the beginning of the twentieth century, done excellently by Siegfried Wagner and Jean Riaud, therefore needs to be understood against this larger cloth. The Essenes—as known from the descriptions by Philo of Alexandria, Josephus, and Pliny—muddied the waters of the Christian portrayal of Judaism. In order to accommodate the significantly ‘other’ type of more mystical Judaism that Esseniism apparently represented, the Essenes had to be explained. Given their communality and allegorical interests, they could be appropriated for Christianity: it was suggested that Jesus either was an Essene or took Essene tenets into his own teaching, though this was a view most thoroughly refuted by A. Regeffe. The Essenes could be seen as mutating into Christian groups, as if it was within Christianity that the Essenes truly belonged. For example, both F. C. Baur and Albrecht Ritschl saw the early Jewish–Christian Ebionites as deriving from Essene roots.

On the other hand, the Essenes could be conflated with the Therapeutae, described by Philo of Alexandria in his treatise De Vita Contemplativa, thereby creating a larger magically minded, quasi-Pythagorean or even Buddhist brotherhood standing apart from the Pharisaic–rabbinc mainstream. In this, they were very marginal, and destined to become extinct.

This Christian scholarly definition of the alien and marginal quality of Esseniism stands in marked contrast to many of the studies of the Essenes taking place within Jewish scholarship at the same time. Jewish scholars of the
nineteenth century had also found the Essenes of Philo, Josephus, and Pliny interesting, but, rather than reaching to Hellenistic philosophy, Buddhism, or even nascent Christianity to explain them, there was a concern to see the Essenes within the context of groups mentioned in rabbinic texts. Jews, of course, never accepted the branding of pre-rabbinic Judaism as essentially unspiritual and had no need to ‘explain’ Essenism as anomalous. Jewish scholarship on the question of the Essenes had begun long before with Azariah de Rossi, in 1567. De Rossi did indeed equate the Essenes and the Therapeutae, but only to link both of these named groupings with the rabbinic Boethusians. By the mid-nineteenth century there was, overall, a different analysis to that of Christian scholarship, with a stress on the Essenes being essentially a phenomenon entirely understandable within the milieu of Judaism. Still, the difficulty lay in fitting them together with a concept of the mainstream proto-rabbinic Judaism that was believed to have led the nation. Various obscure non-rabbinic groups mentioned in the Mishnah and Talmuds were considered key.

In Heinrich Graetz’s monumental history of the Jews, published from 1853 to 1875, the Christian model of the Essenes as being somewhat isolationist was adopted. They were separated from the Pharisaic Judaism to which Graetz traced the rabbis and his own conservative Judaism, and yet, importantly, not that much. Graetz claimed that the Pharisees and the Essenes were essentially part of the same phenomenon. Graetz’s work was highly influential among Jewish scholars, not only in its original German but via the five-volume English edition of his eleven-volume Geschichte der Juden, translated as History of the Jews, and by means of a French edition of volume 3 of this work.

Graetz identified the origins of Essenism as being among the Ḥasidim mentioned in 1 Macc. 2: 42; 7: 13; 2 Macc. 14: 6, a party (Partie, rather than a ‘sect’) from which the Pharisees split, despite a fundamental similarity. The Essenes were extremists, more rigid than the Pharisees in terms of Sabbath rules, with a different understanding of Fate. They were highly fastidious in terms of living priestly purity, while their asceticism was due to lifelong Nazirite practices, but they were by no means alien to Judaism, even though Graetz too could wonder whether Christianity (following John the Baptist)
sprung from their ranks.\textsuperscript{16} The paradigm for the Essenes was nevertheless one of isolationism, which was that of the Ḥasidim themselves:

The strict religious party of Assidaeans withdrew from the scene of passing events, and, in order to avoid mixing in public life, they sought a secluded retreat where they could give themselves up to undisturbed meditation. In this solitude they formed themselves into a distinct order, with strange customs and new views, and received the name of Essenes.\textsuperscript{17}

For Graetz, the Pharisees were the national party, concerned with the nation’s affairs, at the centre of religio-political life. After this came the Sadducees, and only the Pharisees and Sadducees had any powerful influence on events, with most people inclining to Pharisaism, the party that comprised the learned body who correlated with the rabbinic sages. In this supposition, Graetz’s views were not so different from those of Christian scholars. But Graetz continually stressed how fundamentally close the Essenes were to the Pharisees; they were no anomaly. Graetz did not read them as objecting in principle to the Temple, but only to laxer purity standards than those they insisted upon, so that their own purer offerings were sent without any Essenes appearing in person. They were a ‘higher grade’ of piety, not alien to Judaism and not deeply hostile to other parties. Their isolationism and communality were designed to preserve purity only. For Graetz there was no underlying dichotomy between an apparent ‘mainstream’ and ‘marginal’ Judaism.

Graetz’s view dominated Jewish scholarship, and was synthesized into the entry in the \textit{Jewish Encyclopaedia} published in 1902, where the exasperation of Jewish scholars in regard to the theories of their Christian colleagues—who posited outside influence on the Essenes to ‘explain’ their difference from other (rigid, unspiritual, legalistic) Jews and who took Josephus on face value—was clearly evident. Kaufman Kohler, the leading scholar of Reform Judaism who wrote the entry, states:

Accordingly, the strangest theories have been advanced by non-Jewish writers… who found in Essenism a mixture of Jewish and pagan ideas and customs, taking it for granted that a class of Jews of this kind could have existed for centuries without leaving a trace in rabbinical literature, and, besides, ignoring the fact that Josephus describes the Pharisees and Sadducees also as philosophical schools after Greek models.

Following Graetz, the evidence for the Essenes was sought and found in the party of the Ḥasidim, among numerous others scattered throughout the corpus of rabbinic literature, indeed ‘the line between the Pharisees (“Perushim”) and


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. 2: 16 cf. 24: ‘they avoided the glare and tumult of public life’; \textit{Geschichte}, 3: 83, 91.
'A Peculiar Problem': A Short History of Scholarship on the Essenes

Essenes was never very clearly drawn, noted Kohler, and 'there is little in Essene life which does not find its explanation in rabbinical sources'.

Despite all this extensive research from Jewish scholars, undoubtedly the most influential work in terms of defining the Essenes at this point remained that of the German Protestant scholar Emil Schürer, whose five-volume Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi (1885–91) had been translated into English as History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ in 1900, and had become the standard reference. As with his predecessors, Schürer by no means considered Judaism positively, seeing it instead as a religion that relied on duty and legalism. His section division heading (Division II, Book 2) 'Das Leben unter dem Gesetz', or 'Life under the Law' (Section 28), implicitly suggested that the Law was a heavy burden. Jewish prayer itself, to Schürer, could be entrapped in 'external formalism... very far removed from true piety'. Thus, when faced with the Essenes, Schürer confined them to the edges: the Essenes were a Jewish monastic institution. As many other Christian scholars before him, Schürer presented them as a radically different, alienated group to 'der grosse Heerstrasse des jüdischen Volslebens': 'the great high road of Jewish life'. Schürer defined the Essenes as:

a religious community which, though it grew up on Jewish soil, differed essentially in many points from traditional Judaism, and... though it exercised no powerful influence upon the development of the people, deserves our attention as a peculiar problem in the history of religion.

In trying to solve this peculiar problem, Schürer differentiated the Essenes from the Pharisees and Sadducees in terms of their place as a 'sect' within Judaism, stating that 'it scarcely needs the remark, that we have here to deal with a phenomenon of an entirely different kind', for while 'the Pharisees and Sadducees were large political parties, the Essenes might far rather be compared to a monastic order'.

Focusing on their purity and moral excellence, Schürer noted that Josephus stated

21 As noted by Moore, 'Christian Writers on Judaism,' 239–40.
23 Schürer, History, II.2: 190; Geschichte, II.2: 468.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid. The italics are in the English translated edition and the text is emphasized in the original German by spaced lettering.
that there was an order of Essenes who married, but ‘these must have formed a small minority’.  

Schürer did recognize that in the first place Essenism was superlative Pharisaism, but ultimately the Essenes went beyond their contemporaries in piety and behaviour, in that ‘a surpassing of ordinary Judaism is apparent’. But, ultimately, Schürer severed them from the rest of Judaism because they were purportedly separated and alienated from the Temple authorities, rejected animal sacrifices, and prayed towards the sun (rather than to the Temple), indicating that there was a ‘complete breach with Judaism proper . . . ’ or ‘[t]hus Essenism would be a separation from the soil of Judaism proper’. Foreign influences were indeed at work on the Essenes, namely Pythagoreanism.

In another great survey work, The Beginnings of Christianity (1920) by F. J. Foakes-Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, the Essenes are discussed under the title of ‘the ascetic sects’. Unusually, Jackson and Lake did not trace any specific Neo-Pythagorean influence on Essenism but noted that their asceticism was ‘due to the wave of asceticism and of a tendency to abandon society in favour of a more secluded and simpler life, which was sweeping over the whole ancient world, rather than to the direct influence of any single cult, or of Hellenism in the strict sense’. Still, the notion that the Essenes had abandoned society and separated themselves into removed, isolated societies was implicit.

In using the language of ‘sect’ to define groups that are understood to be marginal to the dominant and powerful ‘centre’, these concepts can be linked to the definitions of Max Weber, though Weber’s full study of ancient Judaism did not appear in its final form till 1921. For Weber, all ‘sects’ required some degree of separation from the mainstream (defined universally

26 Schürer, History, 200; Geschichte, II.2: 477.

27 Schürer, History, 212; Geschichte, II.2: ‘ein Hinaugeben über das gewöhnliche Judenthum zeigt’.

28 Ibid. II.2: 213, 218; Geschichte, II.2: ‘ein völliger Bruch mit dem eigentlichen Judenthum (488) . . . Der Essenumismus wäre demnach eine Separation von dem Boden des eigentlichen Judenthum’ (492). Likewise the emphasis is original. Schürer did not link the Essenes with the Therapeutae, as he was convinced that Philo’s treatise De Vita Contemplativa was spurious, representing Christian monastics of a later era. For discussion of the authenticity of this treatise, see Riaud, ‘Thérapeutes,’ 1191–210; Joan E. Taylor, Jewish Women Philosophers of First-Century Alexandria: Philo’s ‘Therapeutae’ Re-considered (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 32–3.

29 For the Essenes as Pythagoreans (cf. Josephus, Ant. 15: 371), see Schürer, History, II.2: 204–6, 216–18; Geschichte, II.2: 480–3, 491–3. Schürer noted that Jewish scholars in the main were comfortable about claiming Essinism for Judaism, seeing it as substantively not that dissimilar from Pharisaism, with Hasidic origins, a view which, by the time of Schürer, was gathering a few more adherents within Christian circles, though this was qualified by looking to either Pythagorean or Zoroastrian influence on Judaism as a whole.


under the category of ‘church’). In his study, Das antike Judentum, Weber did not himself find any problem in identifying even the Pharisees as a sect, despite their mainstream influence. Looking for his definition primarily in the rabbinic portrayal of the Perushim, ‘separated ones’, he noted that a Pharisee segregated himself from impure persons and objects and:

[since they lived in the same purity as the priests, its members claimed holiness equal to those who lived correctly and superior to that of incorrect priests. The charisma of the priest was depreciated in favor of personal religious qualification as proven through conduct. Naturally, this was brought about only gradually.]

For Weber, then, the Pharisees (Perushim) were a sect by means of a separation based on purity, which differentiated them from other Jews, a factor that endorsed Weber’s own particular church/sect dichotomy. However, to Weber, after the fall of the Temple all Judaism became essentially Pharisaic. Thus, Essenis was ‘merely a radical Pharisaic sect’ or ‘order’, being in character ‘strict and monk-like’.

Like many, Weber could not reconcile aspects of Essenis with conceptions of Judaism in general, so that he concluded:

The true motive for the special Essenian way of life is apparently to be found in the gift of grace conveyed by the secret teaching and the quest for this reward. For this contains an element which can be distinctly recognized as alien to Pharisaism and Judaism generally.

The implicit characterization of ‘central’ Judaism as being a religion antithetical to the Lutheran conception of Christianity as a religion led by ‘grace’ led Weber also to brush the Essenes towards the Christians over against the supposedly legalistic and ‘grace-less’ mainstream of Judaism.

The first challenge to this comfortable view among Christian scholars might have come with the momentous discovery and publication of documents identified as deriving from ‘Jewish sectaries’, found within the corpus of the Cairo Genizah in 1910, but in fact this discovery had no impact at all on the study of the Essenes. No one connected the people responsible for what is now known as the Damascus Document (CD A and B) with the Essenes, since the location of the group was plainly stated in these texts to be ‘Damascus’, a

34 Weber, Ancient Judaism, 406; Gesammelte, 423.
place to which people had fled under the leadership of the apparent ‘Star’.\textsuperscript{37} Moreover, given the portrayal of the Essenes in Schürer and others, there seemed to be a different type of Judaism here to that of the ‘monastic’ Essenes: one in which people were married, Temple-attending, and animal-sacrificing. They were identified by Solomon Schechter as refugee ‘Zadokites’ (perhaps Dositheans) bothered by the Pharisees within Judaea.\textsuperscript{38}

In his monumental work, *The History of Religions* (Volume 2: Judaism, Christianity and Mohammedism), published in 1919, the Presbyterian scholar George Foot Moore provided only a brief summary of the Essenes. He contested whether the term ‘sect’ should rightly be applied to the Pharisees—whom he saw as representative of normative Judaism, as noted above—and stated, instead, that there were ‘several bodies to which the term sect may with greater propriety be applied, because they separated themselves more or less completely from the mass of their fellow countrymen in religious matters’. Such were the Essenes who, according to Moore, ‘were a celibate order, living in monasteries’ who had ‘no antecedents in Judaism, and foreign influences are probably to be recognized in some of their peculiar rites and customs’, though Moore rejected the supposition of Buddhist borrowings.\textsuperscript{39} Moore simply gave a brief summary of Philo and Josephus’ testimony and otherwise ignored the Essenes completely.

However, the people responsible for the Damascus Document of the Cairo Genizah made scholars such as Moore suppose that there were other small, unreported sects than those defined in the sources. In his three-volume work, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (1927–8), a study that defined normative Judaism of the first century according to a Pharisaic–rabbinic model,\textsuperscript{40} the ‘sectaries in Damascus’ were grouped with a category of Jewish ‘others’ little understood, and the Essenes were barely mentioned.\textsuperscript{41} Moore’s categories of analysis confidently differentiated between a main line of development in Judaism, which led from the Pharisees to the Rabbis, and ‘sectarian’ offshoots. In Volume 1 of Moore’s study, for example, he reviews a single category comprising: ‘Sectarian Writings: Testaments (of Moses, etc), Jubilees and Sectaries at Damascus’, with the supposition that different writings indicated possible different sects. Perhaps it is here, with Moore, that we find the origins of what would become understood as ‘sectarian Judaism’ in the Second Temple Period, since if every variant theology evidenced in texts

\textsuperscript{38} Schechter, *Documents*, I, xvi–xxi.
\textsuperscript{39} George Foot Moore, *The History of Religions: II: Judaism, Christianity and Mohammedism* (New York: Charles Scribners, 1919), 58.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid. 209, n. 6. Concerning Josephus’ *War* 2, Moore wrote: ‘The long description of the Essenes is a question for itself.’
'A Peculiar Problem': A Short History of Scholarship on the Essenes

could indicate a variant sect, then clearly Judaism of this time was composed of a great number. This is ironic given that Moore himself asserted that Judaism’s strength was in its overarching unity and universality (despite different small sects and variant opinions), based on a ‘uniformity of observance’. The halakhic character of the Damascus Document led Moore to consider that this Damascus group had affinities more ‘with the Pharisees, not with any other variety of Judaism’, and he differentiated them primarily by location: they lived in Damascus. 

In addition, two works promoted a kind of typology for understanding the Essenes within a wider phenomenon, and one that was defined in terms of its marginality to mainstream Judaism. Joseph Thomas, following Wilhelm Brandt, argued the case for there being a baptizing movement that functioned as a kind of counter-cultural, ultra-purist alternative to the mainstream. Within this movement were the Essenes, along with John the Baptist, Bannus, and a variety of second-century ‘sects’ referred to in patristic literature. The identification of this movement served to push the Essenes even further out to the extremities, and into a milieu from which Christianity itself was thought to spring.

In other words, the marginalization of the Essenes, their characterization anachronistically as an isolationist ‘monastic’ order, and their detachment from normative Judaism was all complete before the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered.

When the Dead Sea Scrolls first began to come to light from 1947 onwards, scholars had long understood the region of the north-western Dead Sea as being an Essene locality, on the basis of Pliny, Hist. Nat. 5: 15 [73]. For example, already in August Neander’s monumental history of the Church, published in 1825, we learn that the Essenes lived in the quiet region on the west side of the Dead Sea, what Schürer could call ‘the desert of En Gedi on the Dead Sea’. Their isolation in terms of Judaism as a whole was paralleled in a model of physical isolation and a separation from the holy city of Jerusalem.

Thus, when Syrian Orthodox representatives from St. Mark’s Monastery brought the first scrolls to scholars in Jerusalem, they had an awareness of the Essene location. As John Trever reports in his memoir of the discoveries:

---

42 Ibid. 110–11.
43 In fact, when parts of the Damascus Document were found within the Dead Sea Scrolls corpus, their existence posed one of the most serious issues to contend with in terms of the Qumran-Essene hypothesis, given the way the Essenes have been constructed on the basis of the classical sources.
44 Joseph Thomas, Le Mouvement Baptiste en Palestine et Syrie (Gembloux: Duculot, 1935).
45 Wilhelm Brandt, Die Judischen Baptismen oder das religiose Waschen und Baden im Judentum mit Einschluss der Judenchristentums (Giessen: Topelmann, 1910).
46 See below pp. 248–51.
48 History, II.2, 194; Geschichte, II.2, 470.
Ibrahim [Sowmy] remarked that while working at Allenby Bridge he had studied about the history of Jericho and the Dead Sea area. From his studies he had learned about the Essenes who lived in that region during the lifetime of Jesus, and as a result had become very interested in them. He had suggested to the Syrians at the Monastery that these documents might have belonged to that ancient sect of Jews . . .

One wonders what scholar exactly Ibrahim Sowmy was reading, but it is clear here that the model of the ascetic and isolated Essenes was in the minds of those who looked at the first contents of Cave 1Q, some time before the excavation of the nearby site of Khirbet Qumran. Key texts, particularly the Community Rule (1QS or Serekh), were found to fit with what appeared in the descriptions of the Essenes by Josephus. The Essene identification was made almost the instant the scrolls arrived in Jerusalem: Millar Burrows recorded in his diary for 19 March 1948 that he worked on the ‘Essene manuscript’ at the American School. The Essene hypothesis was most persuasively championed by André Dupont-Sommer, and became the standard view.

The Damascus Document, however, remained contested and its relationship to the group evidenced in the Serekh has been (and continues to be) debated. Elsewhere, when the classical sources and the Scrolls did not correlate, the simple explanation was offered that ancient authors such as Philo, Josephus, or Pliny did not necessarily know the whole story. As was pointed out by Millar Burrows, none of our classical authors was an Essene; each witness is located in the position of an outsider in relation to the group he describes. The Scrolls then were seen to give a more accurate presentation of who the Essenes were than the classical sources, and yet the Scrolls were read with a fixed idea of what these classical sources actually indicated.

While the Qumran-Essene hypothesis—that the Scrolls and the site of Qumran are Essene—became the standard view, different interpretations were also proposed, notably by Cecil Roth and G. R. Driver, who both advocated that the Scrolls should be associated with the ‘Zealots’ who ruled

---

Jerusalem during the revolt of 66–70 CE and also made their way to the Dead Sea, importantly to Masada and to various caves of refuge. As time has gone on, there have been more and more questions asked as to whether the Dead Sea Scrolls should be associated with the Essenes, given discrepancies between what the ancient sources state and what is found in the Scrolls, since not all discrepancies can be explained away by an ‘insider’ versus ‘outsider’ model.

Lawrence Schiffman has argued that some of the key ‘sectarian’ texts of the Scrolls indicate a group that corresponds far better to the rabbinic references to the Tsedukim (Sadducees) than to Josephus’ Essenes. Questions about whether Josephus’ description of the Essenes naturally fits the group(s) evidenced in the Scrolls have also been raised by Steve Mason. Norman Golb has queried the plausibility of the Qumran-Essene hypothesis, strongly emphasising the discrepancies between the Scrolls and the classical sources on the Essenes, and noting that Qumran could have functioned as a fortress. Lena Cansdale, Robert and Pauline Donceel-Voûte, Yizhar Hirschfeld, Yizhak Magen, and Yuval Peleg have all sought to interpret the archaeological remains of Qumran without reference to the Essenes.


Understandably, in the face of these challenges, in 1997 Martin Goodman rightly asked for a careful defence of the Qumran-Essene hypothesis to be made: ‘it is up to proponents of the Essene hypothesis to make their case’. The simple union of Qumran, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Essenes has since then been qualified with a nuancing of the Essene hypothesis. Notably, in the ‘Groningen Hypothesis’, as it is called, Florentino García Martínez and Adam van der Woude have sought to account for differences between the classical sources on the Essenes and the ‘sectarian’ Dead Sea Scrolls by suggesting a separation between a Qumran group and a broader Essene grouping, which is identified not as a small sect but a wide stream of Enochic Judaism, different from rabbinic Judaism, and opposed to a succession of Hasmonean priest-kings. The origins of this wider Essenism/Enochic Judaism are placed within the late third or early second century BCE, just prior to the Maccabean revolt, in an apocalyptic tradition represented by the books of Enoch and Jubilees. Yet, Gabriele Boccaccini concludes that the Dead Sea Scrolls community—defined by the sectarian scrolls—was itself ‘a radical and minority group within Enochic Judaism’. Qumran then remains separated, small, and isolationist.

Over against this, however, is the important thesis of Hartmut Stegemann, who argued on the basis of his reading of the Scrolls that Qumran was not an alienated offshoot of the mainstream Essenes, but comprised one local settlement in a much larger entity. Stegemann pointed out that the Scrolls’ critiques of those in power in Jerusalem and the Temple operations were aimed at the Hasmoneans, not at all other Jews. After the Hasmoneans seized power in the revolt of 167–4 BCE and created a new royal-priestly dynasty, the Essenes formed as a ‘union’ (yahad) opposed to them. They were led by the Teacher of Righteousness, the mysterious High Priest (159–2 BCE) Judas Maccabeus deposed, who at one point fled to Damascus with his supporters (see CD 7: 18–20), though the union was established in the heartland of Judaea. After the collapse of the Hasmonean dynasty, Herod the Great was their patron; they were thus known as ‘Herodians’, as in the Gospels (Mark 3: 6; 12: 13; cf. 8: 15; Matt. 22: 16). Stegemann criticized

64 Hartmut Stegemann, Die Essener, Qumran, Johannes der Täufer und Jesus (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1993); id. The Library of Qumran: On the Essenes, Qumran, John the Baptist, and Jesus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); id. ‘The Qumran Essenes—Local Members of the Main Jewish Union in Second Temple Times,’ in Julio T. Barrera and Luis V. Montaner (eds),
the Qumran-Essene hypothesis not because of its identification of the Scrolls or the site of Qumran as Essene, but for its basic conceptualization of the Essenes as being a marginal and small sect, and disputed whether the tiny site of Qumran could be the Essene centre.

Importantly also, John J. Collins has reviewed the organization reflected in the Scrolls and read within the texts a wide concept, with the *yahad* functioning as a kind of umbrella over multiple groups. Against the concept of Qumran forming a centre and headquarters of Essene communities, Collins argues that there is no one defining centre, but rather an amalgam, a dispersion of groups united by a common ethos, which also developed over time. With this kind of study, any strictly monolithic entity evaporates, particularly any notion that Qumran was itself a defining locus for what is evidenced in the Scrolls.65

Recently, the Israeli philosopher Edna Ullman-Margalit has examined the history of scholarship since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls,66 and has rightly noted the elasticity of the Qumran-Essene hypothesis as it has responded to various criticisms. She has called for a separate analysis of each part of the hypothesis: ‘arguments must be presented independently for each of the three sides of the Essenes-scrolls-Qumran triangle’, though she concludes that the Essene hypothesis remains the most convincing solution.67

This is a wise suggestion. However, in approaching the first part of this triangle, in looking at the Essenes, we cannot proceed without a sharp awareness of the broader categorizations at work in the history of scholarship, especially in the scholarship which has found the Essenes to be a ‘problem’ in terms of a conceptualization of Judaism as a religion lacking those features Paul proclaimed within his churches. We need to be alert to the language that would compartmentalize Judaism for the sake of a Christian *kerygma*. We need to consider the Essenes within a holistic understanding of Second Temple Judaism that is very different from that formulated largely by Christian scholars of the nineteenth century. Despite scholarly critique of these antiquated conceptualizations, arguments both for and against the Qumran-Essene hypothesis have depended on pre-existing notions of who the Essenes actually were, or—all too often—rested on uncritical readings of the ancient

---


67 Ibid. 64, 116.
sources that describe them, readings in which the legacy of tendentious scholarly judgements made over the past centuries can still play a part. Instead of discussions raising issues about the larger context of Judaism of the Second Temple Period, the image of the Essenes among contemporary Scrolls scholars and Qumran archaeologists alike, both Jewish and non-Jewish, can at times travel even further down the Schürer road of seeing the Qumran Essenes as a very isolated and small group, sharing much of their ideology with the Pythagoreans, and withdrawing from not only Temple worship but the city of Jerusalem itself. The studies of nineteenth-century Jewish scholars that resulted in the synthetic analysis presented by Kohler in the *Jewish Encyclopedia* have been forgotten by many, with Stegemann being the most striking dissident in terms of the general view.  

So, for example, Yizhar Hirschfeld, in his re-presentation of Qumran’s archaeology as having nothing to do with the Essenes, assumed a model of the Essenes as ‘a small sect’ against which to present aspects of the site of Qumran. The Essenes were pacifist, and did not eat meat, being ascetic and veritably identical to Pythagoreans:

Another important point concerns the presence of animal bones at what is purported to be an Essene site. Josephus (Ant. 15: 371) says that the Essenes lived ‘a Pythagorean way of life,’ which was ascetic and characterized mainly by vegetarianism. It is absurd to think that the inhabitants of Qumran, who were obviously meat eaters, could also have been Essenes. However, nowhere in the classical sources is it actually stated that the Essenes were vegetarians. For Hirschfeld, too, the presence of women’s skeletons in the cemetery ruled out the identity of the population as Essene because ‘according to Pliny, they shunned the company of women’. In fact, ‘shunned’ is too strong a word for what Pliny actually states, as we shall see. The Essenes are described, according to Hirschfeld, ‘as freely choosing poverty and a frugal life’ and were a ‘small sect living on the periphery of Jewish society, without access to the Jewish administrative establishment in Jerusalem’. This builds considerably on what our sources tell us, but fits completely with the scholarly *tendenz* in constructions of the Essenes throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which the dominant paradigm was of a normative

---

69 Hirschfeld, *Qumran in Context,* 45.
70 Ibid. 111.
71 Ibid. 161.
72 *Qumran in Context,* 231.
Judaism ‘chilled’ by strict Pharisaic legalism, against which the fire of the charismatic Christian proclamation could be contrasted.

A new perspective on Judaism came with the publication in 1977 of E. P. Sanders’ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* and with Sanders’ corresponding work, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE to 66 CE*, in which he set out a vibrant ‘Common Judaism’ based on covenantal nomism: adherence to the Jewish law, which was also the law of the land. This was a law that was essentially about community and deep devotion to God which was far from being narrow, legalistic, or unspiritual.

Yet Sanders, for all his awareness of the nature of the scholarship that preceded him, assumed at the very outset that the Essenes were:

a small group...a tiny and fairly marginal sect...[and while] both the aristocrats and the Pharisees (in my view) need to be saved from misinterpretation...this is not true of the Essenes. They were not major players in politics and society, and no one says they were.

However, the model of Sanders’ ‘Common Judaism’ itself is probably too simple. Beyond Judaea, Judaism becomes harder to define, since praxis could be variously followed. John J. Collins, in *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, concludes after an analysis of the diverse sources that ‘there was no simple normative definition which determined Jewish identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora’, and notes only some ‘persistent tendencies’, including what could be construed as ‘covenantal nomism’, but also ethnic pride ‘with little regard for religious laws or for anything that could be called nomism’, witnessed in the writings of the Alexandrian Artapanus. Collins notes there was also a moral system and code of conduct, loyalty to the Jewish community, the common thread coming from the reliance on the ‘Jewish tradition’. This tradition, in the way Collins frames it, is Scripture. Overall, among scholars of diverse backgrounds there is now a much greater awareness of Second Temple Judaism in all its rich variety, but still with a strong sense of internal cohesion founded on the concept of the Temple, the Law of Moses, and tradition.

---

75 John J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 273–5. For example, Josephus notes that in the conversion of Helena Queen of Adiabene and her son Izates, c.30 CE, instruction in Scripture was an essential part of the process (Ant. 20: 34–53), but Izates gained two opinions from Jewish teachers on whether circumcision was absolutely necessary or not.
Wherever we look in the textual evidence from the first centuries BCE to the second centuries CE, from the Jewish historian Josephus, to the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, to the pseudepigrapha, to works of Jewish mysticism, to the Dead Sea Scrolls, we find diversity. Schürer's ‘Proper Judaism’ has disappeared; Sander’s ‘Common Judaism’ appears not quite comprehensive enough. This has led some to talk not about ‘Second Temple Judaism’ but to ‘Second Temple Judaisms’. There are differences between Judaism in the Diaspora and the land of Israel, but also within Jewish groups within the land, fractures of class, regionality, and legal interpretation, differences between those who interpret scripture literally and allegorical readers. The range of mystical thought is being explored, with material from later times now connected with much earlier texts, and linked not with marginal groups but with the priesthood. The old dichotomies no longer fit the model.

However, Michael Stone embraces the singular ‘Judaism’, as he reaches far to gather in all the material of the age that is deemed ‘heterodox’ by later orthodoxies. This is not a fragmented religion, but one that was thriving creatively, with all kinds of different spiritual, theological, and practical expressions. It just so happens that only those parts that fitted in with a standard imposed upon it by later orthodoxies, whether Christian or Jewish, were preserved. The material Dead Sea Scrolls may appear unusual, but this is because we have lost most of the tapestry from which the texts are cut. Stone traces the survival of lost strands through the centuries, and presents a picture of Second Temple Judaism that completely overturns any sense of a rigid and legalistic tradition, or even a religion that one can sort out into ‘orthodox’ and ‘heterodox’ sections.


In approaching the ancient sources on the Essenes, therefore, they need to be understood against this very different cloth. In reading these sources afresh, it is not necessarily the case that we will be able to slot the Essenes into a working model of Judaism that everyone can support; rather, the sources on the Essenes may provide a key to a better model of Second Temple Judaism as a whole.

In addition, there is greater awareness of the function of rhetoric—the art of persuasion—in studies of classical historiography from the latter part of the twentieth century and through to today. As every ancient historian well knows, the writing of current affairs or history in antiquity could be openly polemical, propagandistic, selective, or exaggerated, and not intended to provide a coolly comprehensive, impartial body of evidence that can be used to create a coherent identity for either an individual or a group. One need only look at Strabo’s summary of Jews and Judaism (Geogr. 16: 2: 35–9) for an example: all Jews are vegetarians and practise both male and female circumcision. Strabo’s presentation shows the Jewish rulers and law as having a fundamentally tyrannical nature, and elements of his description are subsumed into this rhetorical end. If we only had Strabo’s evidence for ancient Judaism, we would not have a simple window to history, since actuality is mixed with fabrication for the sake of convincing the readership of an implicit assertion.

The sources themselves may have been constructed from anecdotal evidence and what today would be termed ‘urban myths’. It is not always possible to weed these out by comparative textual study. One cannot necessarily look to an earlier source for better information than a later one. Later authors could insert more reliable information into unreliable sources, rather than modify reliable sources for the sake of their own rhetoric. In other words, there could have been an ‘invention’ of the Essenes as a historical group, as a result of simple extrapolation from prior sources, as various features were seized upon to create an idea of who the Essenes were that would function within a particular literary piece, so the resulting presentation would become a selective representation of some aspects of previous texts (and possible oral traditions) that are now unknown to us.

Yet, this probably goes too far. In establishing the rhetoricity of historical texts, the danger is that modern scholars can despair of finding reliable factual data, so that to propose that the ‘Essenes’ might be only an imaginative construction with no substantial grounding in actuality assumes that ancient

---

historians were fantasists who did not care about reality. As I have argued elsewhere, the rhetorical can also be historically true. The way forward for a historian or archaeologist when faced with literary rhetoricity is not a simple one of either simply accepting all that is written as being entirely the truth, or viewing everything as the writer’s imagination or selective summarizing of rumour: factuality and exaggeration, history and hearsay, are woven together, and only careful understanding of the contexts of the work in question and the grand themes within a writer’s surviving corpus can lead us towards intelligent understanding.

It is to the extant ancient texts about the Essenes that we must now turn, in order that the Essenes can be clearly identified and understood. Moreover, it is a prerequisite in the exercise that we accept that these can tell us something historically true about the Essenes, or else there is no point in engaging with them at all. Methodologically, in this study, I am going to begin with a presupposition of truth within the texts, and remove elements of the presentations of the Essenes if necessary only after careful scrutiny. This is a random assertion rather than an epistemological position, because there is—fundamentally—very rarely any sure means of establishing the truth empirically. While in ancient history there are possibilities of multiple independent attestation for confirmation in terms of the lives of kings and generals, wars and political events, and different bodies of evidence (epigraphy and numismatics, and diverse histories), once we roam away from ‘great history’ our sources grant us no such luxury. In terms of the ancient evidence for the Essenes we cannot therefore reject any part of the information they provide—even if singly attested—without careful argument which would explain how an author came to present them in a certain way that is most probably inconsistent with historical reality. Almost nothing can be proven to be true, but it does not follow that in that case it must be false.

In these descriptions, it is fundamental to recognize that we are not in the realm of simple truth or falsehood; the truth our authors tell need not be whole. In other words, I will predicate a discussion on Essene identity with a conditional statement: if what the classical authors say is true, yet partial (selective) and shaped by their rhetorical interests, then what can we say about Essene identity? I read historical actuality as conditional on a resounding if. Given that much of the evidence from literature in antiquity is improvable in terms of its veracity, to take a sceptical view that it is therefore unknowable, or not worth trusting, is arbitrary, since equally it cannot be

---

81 See Rachael Elior, Memory and Oblivion: The Secret of the Dead Sea Scrolls (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute and Kibbutz haMeuchad, 2009) (Hebrew). Elior is doubtful given that the Essenes do not apparently appear in rabbinic literature, though by the same criterion of judgement one would assume that Christianity through the first five centuries was constituted by a tiny handful of persons. See the discussion in Part I, Chapter 7 below.

proved to be untrue. In a discussion where no proof can be presented for or against historical actuality, and where rhetoricity does not invalidate historicity, the if prerequisite remains a given. Where, however, it becomes apparent that other evidence happens to cohere with the presentation of our ancient sources, then this creates a somewhat more persuasive picture in terms of history. Nevertheless, nothing proves the evidence, by empirical criteria of assessment.

The Groningen hypothesis and the work of Harmut Stegemann have both led the way in calling for a far more expansive understanding of ancient Essenism, though the old view of the Essenes as a small, marginal group remains very fixed. A fresh review of the ancient sources themselves—now that Second Temple Judaism is much better understood and there is no longer a dominant paradigm within the academy of a legalistic Judaism standing as a foil for ‘liberating’ Christianity—is the chief aim of the chapters that follow in Part I in this book.

The task of reviewing the classical sources on the Essenes is relatively straightforward, since the principal ancient writings on the Essenes have been collected and translated in the German edition of Alfred Adam, and in a more concise English edition by Vermes and Goodman, both books having the Greek and Latin texts as well as a translation. But we will look wider than these sources—to the New Testament, to other Christian material, and to rabbinic texts—in order to define as accurately as possible who the historical Essenes actually were and how they related to others within the world of ancient Judaea.

84 Geza Vermes and Martin Goodman (eds), The Essenes according to the Classical Sources (JSOT Press: Sheffield 1989).