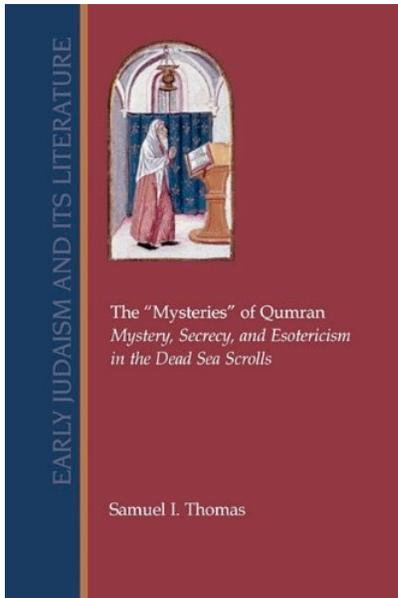


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The “Mysteries” of Qumran: Mystery, Secrecy, and Esotericism in the Dead Sea Scrolls

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The emergence and function of the category of “mystery” in Jewish literature of the Second Temple period and in early Christian writings is a topic that has been repeatedly addressed in the scholarly literature. Most recently, two complementary monographs have returned to this topic, Benjamin L. Gladd’s *Revealing the Mysterion: The Use of Mystery in Daniel and Second Temple Judaism with Its Bearing on First Corinthians* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008) and the book under review here. While Gladd’s survey is more comprehensive, Thomas provides an in-depth analysis of the concept in the Qumran literature.

In the first chapter Thomas identifies the focus of his study as the lexeme *rāz* and the concept to which it refers, noting the incomplete match between the concept of mystery in English and the concept indexed by *rāz*, hence the scare quotes in his title. While other words from the semantic field (e.g., *sôd*, *nistârôt*) are also examined in the course of the work, the distinctiveness and importance of *rāz* is clearly established. It is not just the meaning of “mystery” that concerns Thomas, however, but also its function, a topic that he explores further in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2, “Esotericism, Sectarianism, and Religious Discourses” establishes the conceptual framework for the book, discussing the ways in which the phenomena of secrecy and secret knowledge have been studied across religious traditions. Drawing in particular on the work of sociologist Edward Tiryakian and historian of religion Kocku von Stuckrad, Thomas situates the Qumran discourse on mysteries within the phenomenon of religious esotericism more generally but also locates it in relation to the role of esoteric knowledge within ancient Near Eastern scribalism. The five key features of Qumran esotericism he identifies as (1) “The rhetoric of a previously hidden truth delivered by mediation by a specific authority”; (2) “The notion of a chain of ‘initiates’ and sages who determine the course of revelation”; (3) “The claim that knowledge is combined with individual religious experience”; (4) “Comprehensive cognitive mappings of nature and the cosmos, and of the ontological reflections of ultimate reality”; (5) Ritual initiation of new members by those already holding esoteric knowledge” (52).

Chapter 3, “Secrets, Mysteries, and the Development of Apocalyptic Thought,” investigates the historical background and context for the concept of mystery, exploring notions of the divine council in prophetic and sapiential texts and speculations about the primal human and antediluvian sages, as well as the occurrences of the word *rāz* in pre-Qumranic texts. The most important findings are that the key developments occur in Aramaic speaking priestly-scribal guilds who appear to have been responsible for the introduction of the term *rāz* and its association with apocalyptic themes, paving the way for the development of a new range of uses and meaning for the concept of mystery.

In chapter 4, “A Lexicology of Mystery in the Qumran Scrolls, Thomas provides a semantic map of *rāz*, as well as other words from the same semantic field. Although very thorough and carefully executed, the analysis of the texts presents few surprises, though it is striking that Qumran texts, especially those of sectarian composition, exhibit such a distinct preference for using *rāz* in construct phrases (e.g., “mysteries of wonder,” “mysteries of knowledge,” “mysteries of evil”). Thomas helpfully provides a chart of the various verbs employed with *rāz*, noting that they fall mostly into the categories of verbs of revealing, concealing, perceiving, or knowing. The domains of knowledge to which the category of mystery is applied are cosmological, eschatological, and theological.

In the final chapter, “Prophetic, Sapiential, and Priestly ‘Mysteries,’” Thomas attempts to sort the uses of the term according to the type of discourse in which they figure, acknowledging that the categories overlap in significant ways. While there is some use of mystery terminology associated with the calendrical and cultic concerns of priestly discourse, the more important findings have to do with its role in sapiential and particularly in prophetic contexts. Thomas demonstrates that *rāz* is closely associated with the notion of continuing revelation as it occurs both in experiential and exegetical

modes. Even where the revelatory medium is textual, the mode of contemplation of the mystery is often described in visual terms, particularly through the verb “to gaze” (*nābaṭ*), suggesting not only the possible influence of traditions related to Moses (cf. Num 12:8; 21:4–9) but also a somewhat mystical turn in the understanding of the revelatory process. The book concludes with an appendix on the Persian etymology of the word *rāz*.

The virtues of this volume are significant. Thomas is methodologically rigorous, careful in his analysis, and prodigious in his research. The bibliographic notes are astonishing in their comprehensiveness. But does the book deliver on its intention to analyze the functions of mystery language in the Qumran scrolls? To a significant extent it does, though one is left with the sense that the threads of the research never quite come together as significantly as they might. One of the reasons for this is that arguments about the functions of mystery language are taken up in different parts of the book and not fully integrated into a comprehensive picture. Early on Thomas makes the commonsensical argument that mystery language is as much about issues of authority and symbolic power and the strategies for asserting such power (2). Later, he takes up the boundary-marking function of claims to esoteric knowledge and rightly notes the role of this discourse in the self-fashioning of a community that attempted to construct a new identity for its members (67–68). These are both important claims, though they are the “low-hanging fruit” of the argument and remain at a level of generality. Thomas does begin to get at some of the more fine-grained analysis of the self-fashioning in the arguments he makes in the final chapter about the role of the discourse of mystery in the phenomenon of continuing revelation and the transformation of religious practices and religious experiences as a result. One senses, however, that there is yet more to be said on the ways in which the language of mysteries functions both within particular texts and within the Qumran community. Thomas’s excellent work accomplishes much and provides a superb foundation for further work on this issue.