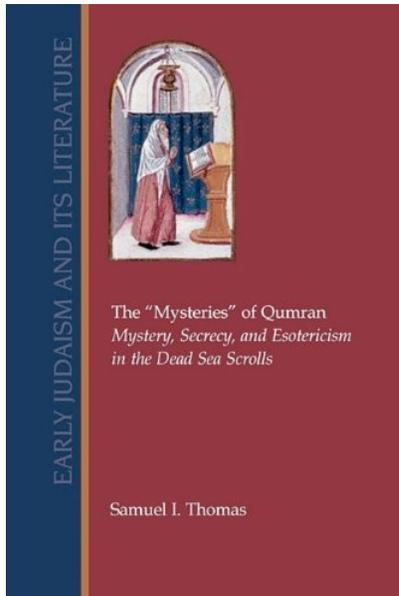


RBL 05/2011



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

Society of Biblical Literature Early Judaism and Its Literature 25

Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009. Pp. xvii + 311. Paper. \$39.95. ISBN 9781589834132.

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There are plenty of mysteries related to the Qumran texts. There is specific language related to mystery and secrecy, and apocalyptic language and worldview are linked to these concepts. One could also note the usage of cryptic alphabets and symbolic terms used in the pesharim for various groups of people. Texts related to astrology and astronomy and physiognomy are esoteric. Furthermore, there is a larger conceptual worldview that stands behind the usage of this language and these texts.

This work is a revision of the author’s doctoral dissertation. Typical of a dissertation, there is an extensive forty-page bibliography and detailed footnotes interacting with much secondary literature. Most of the research is related to the topic of secrecy and esotericism in religious texts broadly, with more attention given to Second Temple Judaism. These are helpful and useful surveys about mystery, secrecy, and esotericism that the author uses to explain the Qumran texts.

In the introductory chapter 1, Thomas discusses difficulties of defining terms such as “mystery” and “secrecy” and “esotericism.” He is interested, in part, in explaining the meaning of terms used for “mystery,” but he is also interested in the conceptual understandings that underlie those words. As he says, “I am interested here in delineating

the semantic diversity of mystery language in the Scrolls while also elucidating the conceptual frameworks in which this language is deployed” (17).

In this chapter Thomas lays out some assumptions about the Qumran texts that are central to the work. He follows the Groningen hypothesis in viewing all the Qumran texts as a library belonging to one community. Some of these texts are sectarian; some are not. Some were written by other groups of people, but his interest is in the usage of the final collection by the *Yahad*.

Thomas addresses three topics in chapter 2: “Esotericism, Sectarianism, and Religious Discourse.” Here he provides what he calls the “conceptual framework for the chapters that follow” (79). He discusses the concept of “esotericism” and sectarianism in Second Temple times. Finally, he describes prophetic, sapiential, and priestly discourses that cover most of the Qumran material.

In chapter 3 he traces the terms *sod* “council” and *raz* “mystery,” beginning with biblical prophetic texts and ending with apocalyptic texts. He begins with the heavenly council, where prophets learn what is happening in the heavens; then he speaks of a heavenly person who has all knowledge, such as Enoch. Some wisdom sources indicate that some knowledge is hidden from humans. Finally, in apocalyptic texts there is an interest in revealing knowledge of the historical and cosmic realms.

Chapter 4, “A Lexicology of Mystery in the Qumran Scrolls,” deals with the meaning of particular terms and phrases used for mystery in the Qumran texts. One expression discussed is the “mystery that is to be.” He mentions that the conceptual field of *raz* includes “contents of esoteric knowledge—with the unveiling, knowing, and concealing matters of ultimate concern” (185) and indicates that more study should be devoted to the verbs linked to terms for mystery but does not investigate them. This was surprising because this might have been a way to link these specific terms to larger conceptual realities.

In chapter 5 Thomas links the particular terms for mystery discussed in the previous chapter to the three larger discourses of prophecy, sapiential, and priestly texts. The connection with prophetic texts is clearest and ties back to chapter 3, related to the divine council. Little attention is given to sapiential material, since as Thomas suggests much earlier scholarship has already dealt with this area. Thomas does not spend much time with priestly language because he says that he has dealt with liturgical literature elsewhere. The treatment of sapiential and priestly discourses seems too brief to provide a comprehensive view for the usage of mystery.

More attention should have been devoted to the method that can be used to reconstruct the conceptual framework that will explain the usage of particular words such as “mystery.” There was mention of the work of James Barr and problems of the study of words and trying to reconstruct biblical theology from words, but Thomas did not really avoid Barr’s critique here. Rolf Knierim has given much attention to conceptual analysis of texts in works such as his *Text and Concept in Leviticus 1:1–9* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992). Two of his students who have used this method in their dissertations are Won W. Lee, *Punishment and Forgiveness in Israel’s Migratory Campaign* (Eerdmans, 2003), and Mignon Jacobs, *Conceptual Coherence of the Book of Micah* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2009). More reflection needs to be given to difficulties of a conceptual analysis.

Thomas indicates that an anonymous reviewer had suggested he had placed too much emphasis on deriving concepts from words in an earlier version of the book—somewhat like James Barr’s critique about the Biblical Theology movement (16). This problem has not been resolved in this edition of the book. I would have to agree with the anonymous reviewer in part here. While Thomas agrees that “words and concepts are not the same thing” (17), he seems to move too rapidly from words to concepts or from concepts to words.

But it is not just that he is trying to read too much from words. More than this, it appears that he thinks that phenomenological parallels of other esoteric groups using secrecy can provide the conceptual framework for the Qumran texts. Thomas’s discussion of esotericism as used in the larger discourses of prophetic, sapiential, and priestly texts does provide a larger and more comprehensive framework for the use of this language. He introduces these discourses in chapter 2 and returns to them in chapter 5, but there is still quite a gap between the terms used for mystery in chapter 4 and these larger discourses. It seems to me that the broad study of esotericism presented in chapters 2 and 3 is largely imposed upon the texts in chapter 4 without adequate justification.

In the conclusion Thomas makes the final claim: “I have tried in this study to crystallize a salient feature of the discursive world of the *Yahad*, if only long enough to say something helpful about the ways in which members of this group constructed social boundaries, characterized the knowledge they possessed, and interpreted their received traditions through their intellectual work, communal and ritual practice, and scribal activity” (241–42). This statement does indicate some of the many topics that are addressed in this book. While “something helpful” has been said about each of these topics, there were too many topics addressed and not enough time to develop these ideas very far.

There are many mysteries that remain in the Qumran texts. There is a good survey here of the broader issues of secrecy and mysteries that are used in other traditions. Some of this is helpful for illuminating the Qumran texts. There is a good survey of language related to mystery found in the Scrolls and also a good treatment of how some of the ideas emerge from biblical texts. There are some intriguing possibilities for further study, such as prominent usage of esoteric materials in the Aramaic texts. But I am not convinced that Thomas has linked adequately the conceptual framework to the language about mystery in the Qumran texts.