ESSENES AND LURKING SPARTANS IN JOSEPHUS’ JUDEAN WAR: FROM STORY TO HISTORY

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Recent vigorous disagreement about the identity of the Qumran community exposes in part the faulty method by which conclusions were initially drawn and permitted to ossify. Once the site of Qumran had been identified as an Essene installation and the Dead Sea Scrolls declared Essene productions, this nexus imposed constraints upon interpreters of both the DSS and the Greek and Latin texts that describe Essenes. Exegesis had now to fit the theory. And since the Scrolls had become primary sources for the Essenes, those texts that actually mention the Essensoi/Esseni suffered the greater violence. Difficulties in aligning these very different kinds of texts could be explained as resulting from the misunderstandings of outsiders. Still today, the main print resources for the “Qumran Essenes,” whether comprehensive studies or specific treatments of Josephus’ Essenes, substitute an item-by-item accommodation to the Scrolls for a contextual reading of the Essene passages.

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1 The heart of this paper was presented at the 2004 International Josephus Colloquium in Dublin. I wish to thank Dr. Zuleika Rodgers for the opportunity to gain feedback from so many specialists, and the specialists themselves for helpful critique. The material will appear in full in my commentary to War 2, volume 1a of Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary (Brill, expected 2006).


3 Various attempts have been made to find a Semitic root for the Essenes’ name in the DSS. But all face the same liability: unless there is a compelling reason in the Scrolls themselves to think that the term was a primary group label (rather than an ad hoc characterization) and unless it is naturally rendered in Greek as Essaioi, conditions far from satisfied thus far, any proposal for a Semitic root must lean upon the Qumran-Essene hypothesis; so, its use as proof of the same hypothesis would entail a circular argument.

4 Cross (1961, 70): the Essene descriptions reveal an “exterior view or Hellenizing tendency”; cf. 76, 78; Sanders (1992, 379): “Certainly his description does not convey adequately the flavour of the Scrolls.”


6 Beall 1988, 3; Gray 1993, 5, but 81; Bergmeier 1993, 9, 51–52; Rajak 1994, 143.
Such a circular method⁷—we interpret Josephus’ Essenes (for instance) in light of the DSS and then use the alleged parallels to prove identity⁸—could not generate stable results. A historical hypothesis identifying the DSS authors with Josephus’ Essenes should have been required to show how adequately the posited Qumran-Essene phenomenon would explain Josephus’ treatment of the group. But in the 1950s, when the Authorized View was becoming established, there were no interpretations of Josephus’ Essene portrait, or of much else in his œuvre, to be explained.⁹ In the near absence of any appreciation of his works as compositions—of their structures, major and minor themes, language, or rhetorical devices—scholars were not in a position to demand that the new hypothesis explain Josephus’ portrait, and this crucial requirement of historical hypotheses was overlooked.

Now that the Qumran-Essene hypothesis is creaking under other pressures, while many students of Josephus’ works have at last begun to attend to their compositional traits, it seems an appropriate time to re-evaluate Josephus’ Essenes in situ—without assuming a DSS referent. How would we understand his accounts if we examined them solely in light of his larger narratives and first audiences, the way we are beginning to analyze this corpus in general? Available space does not permit complete coverage of Josephus’ Essenes here. It must suffice to consider the main passage, War 2.119–161, which Josephus characterizes as his definitive statement (Ant. 13.173; 18.11; Life 10). My thesis has two sides, namely: that War’s Essene passage is an integral part of the larger story, and that understanding the way in which the War uses the Essenes makes the Qumran-Essene hypothesis even more implausible than one might have feared. The first claim may seem obvious or even trite to readers unfamiliar with the state of Josephus studies. Since the Essene passage along with much else

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⁷ Opponents of the Qumran-Essene hypothesis often find a similarly vicious circle in the assumed connection between Khirbet Qumran and the Scrolls from the nearby caves. See Hirschfeld 2004, 4–6.

⁸ Put clearly by VanderKam (1994, 89): “It is reasonable to interpret the evidence in such a way that the sources [e.g., Josephus and the DSS] do not conflict.” I cannot see the reason in this approach, which seems to borrow more from systematic theology than from history.

⁹ Bilde 1988, 71, 92, 102, 118. Even at his time of writing he could find little or no scholarship on the structures, aims, and audiences of Josephus’ major compositions.