

## COMPLICATING THE NOTION OF AN 'ENOCHIC JUDAISM'

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Gabriele Boccaccini's *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis*<sup>1</sup> advances a boldly provocative reconstruction of the social and literary history of Second Temple Judaism. Fusing the purportedly 'historical' testimonia to Jewish sectarianism contained in contemporary apologists like Josephus and Philo with the contents of a number of the legendary, programmatic, and exegetical texts recovered from the caves at Qumran, Boccaccini posits the existence of a so-called 'Enochic Judaism' out of which the Essene movement described in Josephus and Philo later emerged. This alleged 'Enochic' strain of Judaism is so named because he closely identifies it with a distinctive religious ideology he discerns undergirding the contents of what eventually is incorporated within the *Ethiopic Book of Enoch* or *1 Enoch*, more primitive portions of which have been recovered in Aramaic from Qumran. He isolates what he considers to be the defining contours of this particular ideology: a mythopoeic interpretation of early human history, a theodicy at variance with what he portrays as the normative biblical one, a deterministic understanding of the progression of historical events, and a devotion to the antediluvian figure of Enoch as the paramount medium of divine revelation. 'Enochic Judaism,' according to Boccaccini, competed alongside and against other varieties of Second Temple Judaism, such as 'Zadokite Judaism' and Samaritanism, for the allegiance of the populace at large, and eventually gave birth to what Boccaccini terms 'mainstream Essene Judaism,' a social movement out of which and in reaction to which the peculiar sectarian community of Qumran

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<sup>1</sup> G. Boccaccini, *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis: The Parting of the Ways between Qumran and Enochic Judaism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998). My criticism of the socio-literary entity labeled 'Enochic Judaism' is based solely on its presentation and delineation in that work. I have since discovered (August 2003) that Boccaccini's new book *Roots of Rabbinic Judaism: An Intellectual History, from Ezekiel to Daniel* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002) effectively addresses several of the concerns raised in this critique.

emerged. Long recognized discrepancies between the contents of the Qumran texts and the reports about the Essenes found in Jewish and classical sources can be resolved by ascribing the descriptions found in the latter works to the broader antecedent ‘mainstream’ movement, whereas the Qumran evidence attests to the existence of a sectarian rift within Essenism which attempts to harmonize the competing ‘Enochic’ and ‘Zadokite’ currents.

Such *in nuce* is the wide-ranging thesis of Boccaccini. There are many attractive features to his arguments, not least among which is his elegant solution to the vexing problem of, as Norman Golb put it, ‘who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls?’<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, as I see it, there are at least three major conceptual difficulties with his broad thesis which will each require some extended rehearsal in the present context. The first difficulty relates to the generation *de novo* of an ‘Enochic Judaism’ (basically by retrojecting ‘Essenism’ backward in time) out of the exceedingly murky religio-historical situation of the post-exilic Achaemenid province of Yehud. A second problem is his overly positivistic reading of Hellenistic and Roman era Jewish Enochic literature through the restrictive and distorting lens of one post-Christian expropriation and arrangement of this material. The third and perhaps most damning involves his uncritical acceptance of the category ‘Essene’ as a meaningful label for actual religious behavior within the Judaism of the late Second Temple era.

1. Basing himself almost exclusively on the literary witnesses recovered from Qumran, Boccaccini confidently constructs an ‘Enochic Judaism’ as a distinct ideological movement which emerges within the Second Temple period of Jewish history. It arises in conscious opposition to what he labels ‘Zadokite Judaism,’ another construction which he defines as the religious program sanctioned by the priestly elite who controlled the Jerusalem Temple cultus. Enochic Judaism thus forms a ‘nonconformist priestly tradition’ (p. 71) designed to subvert Zadokite textual and social hegemony. Boccaccini holds that the library of texts recovered at Qumran can be mapped across these two polarities. Zadokite literature, according to Boccaccini, ‘includes most of the so-called biblical texts [excepting Esther and Daniel] and also apocryphal texts such as the Epistle of Jeremiah, Tobit, and Sirach’ (p. 68). Enochic texts, on the other hand, are represented in the Qumranic library by the Aramaic fragments of the Astronomical Book (*I Enoch* 72-82), the so-called Book of the Watchers (*I Enoch* 6-36), and the Aramaic Levi document.

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<sup>2</sup> N. Golb, *Who Wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls? The Search for the Secret of Qumran* (New York: Scribner, 1995).

In order to delineate the interests and claims of each group, Boccaccini isolates a series of characteristic elements or motifs which he argues can serve as ‘markers’ to locate a particular text within an ‘Enochic’ or ‘Zadokite’ literary orbit. According to Boccaccini, Zadokite Judaism operates within the confines of an ordered universe which establishes clearly demarcated boundaries between binary categories like good and evil, holy and ordinary, and pure and impure. Disruptive or destructive forces can be controlled or deflected provided these boundaries remain inviolate. The maintenance of these boundaries, and indeed, of the very cosmos itself, is overseen by the Jerusalem priesthood and the rituals performed by them in the Temple. By contrast, Enochic Judaism holds that present existence is characterized by cosmic disorder, a disruption occasioned by supernatural forces and agencies acting in rebellion against the creator deity. Evil and impurity lie largely outside human control, and the restoration of a primal harmony must await divine intervention.<sup>3</sup>

Leaving aside for the moment the pertinent question as to whether his dual schematic ordering and conceptual appraisal actually does full justice to the multiple ideologies and variegated contents of the Qumran corpus, it should perhaps first be asked whether the physical evidence collected from a single rural encampment in Judaea can bear the rhetorical weight with which Boccaccini invests it. Qumran affords us a snap-shot view of at least one and perhaps several Jewish textual communities during the late Second Temple period. Can we legitimately extrapolate from this limited perspective a wide-angle view that will shed light on the ideological currents coursing through *all* Jewish textual communities for the entire Second Temple period? Such a wide-angle view would also need to take into account the various regional centers of intellectual culture and their relatively sparse testimonia to both literary and behavioral trends and activities. Can we, for example, trace Enochic and/or Zadokite trajectories or tensions among the literary products of Alexandrian Judaism? Or among those, assuming they can be identified, of Babylonian Judaism? Or perhaps, most importantly, among that corpus of largely Hebrew language texts which comprise what will eventually be labeled ‘sacred scripture’; namely, the Tanakh?

We must not forget that the Second Temple period during which Boccaccini contextualizes his Enochic and Zadokite movements is also the era when Jewish scripturalism emerges as a vital social force. Those texts which will eventually become Tanakh are being promulgated, redacted, and shaped at the very

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<sup>3</sup> See Boccaccini 68-74.

same time that Boccaccini claims the Enochic and Zadokite *Tendenzen* are struggling for influence, and given the fairly rigid boundaries governing literacy in ancient Near Eastern societies, it is arguably the very same groups—Zadokites, Enochites, etc.—that are also involved in *this* authorial and editorial process. Boccaccini is of course cognizant of this cultural development. As stated above, he situates most ‘biblical’ literature among the Zadokite camp. His classification of ‘biblical’ texts however betrays a kind of uncritical assumption on his part about the age and authority of ‘Bible’ in the Second Temple world, an assumption which he rightly criticizes in another place (p. 57) but which he inexplicably reverts to when isolating his ‘Enochic’ and ‘Zadokite’ Judaisms. It is a slippage of the kind that Bob Kraft has jocularly labeled ‘the tyranny of canonical consciousness’; namely, the common, almost unconscious, yet anachronistic and hence unwarranted retrojection of the later canonical conceptions formed within classical Judaism and Christianity onto the still inchoate literary productions of the Second Temple period.

Boccaccini expends very little effort in trying to connect his alleged movement with the onset of early Jewish scripturalism,<sup>4</sup> a phenomenon which arguably was inaugurated with the mission of Ezra and which eventually achieved dominance over all currents of Judaism which flourished during the Roman period, both in Eretz Israel and in the Diaspora. The question which must be asked, it seems to me, is how does an alleged Enochic Judaism relate to the construction and promulgation of the Pentateuch and other scriptural collections? A simple polarity of ‘Bible’ versus ‘Enoch,’ which is what I read Boccaccini to be saying, brushes over some essential issues which need more careful study before being swept aside.

I must confess that despite Enoch’s (both character and work) undeniable connections with Mesopotamian lore<sup>5</sup> that I am very sympathetic to the general tenor (if not always the specific points) of the arguments advanced in the past by Jonathan Z. Smith, Margaret Barker, Robert Murray, and most recently revived and solidified by Seth Schwartz which situate the Enochic legends among the autochthonous mythical lore associated with the royal cultus of the First Temple;<sup>6</sup> in other words, the very social circles

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<sup>4</sup> But see n.1 above.

<sup>5</sup> H. Ludin Jansen, *Die Henochgestalt: Eine vergleichende religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Oslo: Dybwad, 1939); P. Grelot, “La légende d’Hénoch dans les apocryphes et dans la Bible: Origine et signification,” *RSR* 46 (1958) 5-26, 181-210; idem, “La géographie mythique d’Hénoch et ses sources orientales,” *RB* 65 (1958) 33-69; J.C. VanderKam, *Enoch and the Growth of an Apocalyptic Tradition* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1984); J.C. Reeves, “Enoch, Books of,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 8.453-55.

<sup>6</sup> J.Z. Smith, “Wisdom and Apocalyptic,” in *Religious Syncretism in Antiquity* (ed. B.A. Pearson; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975) 131-56; M. Barker, “Some Reflections upon the Enoch Myth,” *JSOT*

from whom Boccaccini derives his Zadokite group, the supposed adversaries of ‘Enoch.’ I agree, as even Boccaccini recognizes, that the figure of Enoch and most Enochic literature have deep roots in priestly traditions,<sup>7</sup> but I suspect they are not as ‘nonconformist’ as Boccaccini seems to think. I would add that the speculative cosmogonical and cosmological wisdom characteristic of the earliest layers of our extant Enochic sources and which continue to resurface up to a millennium and a half later in medieval Jewish, Christian, and Muslim texts<sup>8</sup> should be associated with the intermediate redactional stages of the pentateuchal source labeled by modern source critics as the Priestly or P source. I also suspect that Milik may be brilliantly prescient in his recognition that what we now know as *I Enoch* 6-11 is actually more primitive than and presupposed by Gen 6:1-4; I would even be willing to endorse the Enochic passage as an integral component of an earlier rendition of the Priestly narrative of antediluvian events, and hence, of the biblical book of Genesis itself.

2. The book now referred to by scholars as *I Enoch* exists in this integral form only within the Ethiopic scriptural tradition. This is a circumstance which has gone largely unappreciated by most students of Second Temple and Roman era Jewish literature. Hence I will restate this proposition in a more provocative way: the work referenced by scholars as *I Enoch* is not a Jewish book; rather, the surviving textual evidence indicates it is a Christian compilation. *I Enoch* 1-108 occurs as a textual unit only within the Ethiopic Christian biblical canon.<sup>9</sup> Smaller consecutive portions of what eventually becomes *I Enoch* are extant in several Greek manuscripts, and isolated chapters or citations occur among Greek, Latin, Coptic, and Syriac witnesses, but again only within what are blatantly Christian contexts, the longest of which do not seem to predate the fourth or fifth century CE.<sup>10</sup> The Akhmim or Panopolis manuscript

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15 (1980) 7-29; idem, *The Older Testament: The Survival of Themes from the Ancient Royal Cult in Sectarian Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1987); R. Murray, “‘Disaffected Judaism’ and Early Christianity: Some Predisposing Factors,” in *“To See Ourselves as Others See Us”: Christians, Jews, “Others” in Late Antiquity* (ed. J. Neusner and E.S. Frerichs; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985) 263-81; S. Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. To 640 C.E.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 74-87.

<sup>7</sup> Note *Jub.* 4:25; 7:38-39; 21:10. See M.E. Stone, “The Book of Enoch and Judaism in the Third Century B.C.E.,” *CBQ* 40 (1978) 479-92, esp. 489-90; VanderKam, *Enoch* 185-86.

<sup>8</sup> For an initial cataloguing of these texts, see my forthcoming *The Recovery of the Enochic Library*.

<sup>9</sup> Nickelsburg’s recent commentary points out that of the 45 Ethiopic manuscripts cataloged by S. Uhlig, only 29 contain all 108 chapters. Does this mean that *I Enoch* is still textually fluid within the Ethiopic tradition? This circumstance is arresting, and demands further study and reflection.

<sup>10</sup> The 7Q Greek fragments which purportedly stem from an early Greek recension of the ‘Epistle’ (*I Enoch* 91-105) are, in the words of M.A. Knibb, ‘too small for any certain identification to be possible’;

transmits a recognizable form of *I Enoch* 1:1-32:6 (also a duplicate version of 19:3-21:9) together with excerpts from the *Gospel* and *Apocalypse of Peter*. The Chester Beatty-Michigan papyrus gives us *I Enoch* 97:6-107:3 (sans chap. 105) together with Melito's *Homily on the Passion*. The Byzantine chronographer George Syncellus provides four separate quotations from works which he or his source(s) termed 'the first book of Enoch about the Watchers' (ἐκ τοῦ πρώτου βιβλίου Ἐνώχ περι τῶν ἐγγρηγόρων), 'the word of Enoch' (ἐκ τοῦ λόγου Ἐνώχ), or simply 'Enoch's book' (ἐν τῇ βίβλῳ αὐτοῦ Ἐνώχ).<sup>11</sup> Most of these excerpts overlap with what eventually becomes *I Enoch* (6:1-9:4; 8:4-10:14; 15:8-16:1), but one of them is 'apocryphal.' This latter circumstance is suggestive, and when coupled with the similar appearance of Enochic 'apocrypha' at Qumran<sup>12</sup> and the dozens of instances of putative Enochic citations or references to be found within later Jewish, Christian, gnostic, and Muslim works,<sup>13</sup> serves to remind us that producing 'books of Enoch' was a cottage industry in the Near East during late antiquity and the medieval eras: were we to take the word of *Slavonic Enoch* seriously, we could read a different 'book of Enoch' every day during almost an entire year!<sup>14</sup>

It is undeniable that the bulk of the content of what eventually becomes *I Enoch* possesses a Jewish origin. The Aramaic (and arguably Hebrew)<sup>15</sup> fragments recovered from Qumran indicate this much, even though they do not come anywhere close to mirroring the eventual contents of *Ethiopic Enoch*. Seven distinct manuscripts preserve various parts of *I Enoch* 1-36, 85-90, and 91-107, and four additional manuscripts relate to *I Enoch* 72-82. Multiple copies of other allied compositions, such as the *Book of Giants*, are also attested,<sup>16</sup> and it is unclear how they might factor into the creation of an ancient Enochic

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cited from his important study "Christian Adoption and Transmission of Jewish Pseudepigrapha: The Case of *I Enoch*," *JSJ* 32 (2001) 401.

<sup>11</sup> *Georgii Syncelli: Ecloga Chronographica* (ed. A.A. Mosshammer; Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1984) 11.19 (cf. 27.8); 24.10; 34.18.

<sup>12</sup> For the *Book of Giants*, see below. Note also the 'rogue' fragments of 4Q201 2-8 published by L.T. Stuckenbruck in DJD 36 pp. 3-7, none of which seem to correspond with any part of our extant Enochic literary tradition. I thank Prof. Stuckenbruck for calling these items to my attention.

<sup>13</sup> See n.8 *supra*.

<sup>14</sup> *2 En.* 10:2, 5-7 (short version); see A. Vaillant, *Le livre des secrets d'Hénoch: Texte slave et traduction française* (Paris: Institut d'études slaves, 1952).

<sup>15</sup> Note 1Q19, whose true status as either translation or source for its Aramaic parallel has yet to be satisfactorily resolved.

<sup>16</sup> J.C. Reeves, *Jewish Lore in Manichaean Cosmogony: Studies in the Book of Giants Traditions* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1992); L.T. Stuckenbruck, *The Book of Giants from Qumran: Texts, Translation, and Commentary* (TSAJ 63; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997); idem, in *Qumran Cave 4, XXVI: Cryptic Texts ... and Miscellanea, Part 1* (DJD 36; ed. S.J. Pfann, et al.; Oxford: Clarendon, 2000)

‘library.’ It seems likely that Enochic ‘apocrypha’ were a staple of pseudepigraphic forgery even at this early stage. M.A. Knibb estimates that perhaps just under one-fifth of the Ethiopic version is represented at Qumran, and then qualifies this assessment by stating that ‘the Aramaic fragments which have survived are severely damaged; mostly we have to do with quite small pieces of text, and in no case do we have anything approaching an entire column from one of the manuscripts.’<sup>17</sup> This being the case, I think we need to be wary about ideological reconstructions and especially codicological arrangements which automatically assume that one particular post-Christian editorial scheme should govern our understanding of how physically isolated and scribally distinct portions of the Enochic corpus relate to one another. The surviving Aramaic fragments provide meager evidence for the primitive ‘joining’ of one Enochic subdivision to another; namely, the placement of *I Enoch* 1-5 prior to the ‘Book of Watchers’ (6-36),<sup>18</sup> and there is even less compelling evidence for the linkage of the Noah birth-story (*I Enoch* 106-107) to the final lines of the so-called ‘Epistle’ (*I Enoch* 91-105) in 4Q204 (4QEn<sup>c</sup> ar) 5 i frag. a.<sup>19</sup> Further assumptions or pronouncements about the placement of the other Enoch subdivisions (e.g., ‘Similitudes’) or even apocrypha (e.g., *Book of Giants*) is completely speculative.

Ideological reconstructions such as those advanced by Boccaccini need to bear the complicated shape of the reception-history of Enochic literature in mind when formulating their hypotheses about its intellectual background and interests. For example, it is only within *this* external context that one can speak intelligibly of an alleged Enochic pentateuch which was allegedly designed to subvert its Mosaic rival. Crucial components like the ‘Similitudes’ (*I Enoch* 37-71) are nowhere attested in Second Temple literature and should probably be banished henceforth from such discussions.

**3.** A final soft point in Boccaccini’s construction of an ‘Enochic Judaism’ involves his uncritical embrace of the existence of a sect termed ‘Essenes’<sup>20</sup> among the expressions of Judaism during the

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8-94; É. Puech, “Livre des Géants,” *Qumrân Grotte 4, XXII: Textes araméens, première partie, 4Q529-49* (DJD 31; Oxford: Clarendon, 2001) 9-115.

<sup>17</sup> M.A. Knibb, *The Ethiopic Book of Enoch: A New Edition in the Light of the Aramaic Dead Sea Fragments* (2 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1978) 2.12.

<sup>18</sup> 4QEn<sup>b</sup> 1 ii lines 1-2 (plate VI) in J.T. Milik, *The Books of Enoch: Aramaic Fragments of Qumrân Cave 4* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976). Note however that line 1 contains only the bottom stroke(s) of one or two letters (read by Milik and those following him as מ[?]), which is hardly enough to guarantee that this line indeed concluded with what corresponds in later versions to *I Enoch* 5!

<sup>19</sup> See PAM 43.202 and plate XIV in Milik, *Books of Enoch*.

<sup>20</sup> Greek spellings: Ἐσσοῖτοι or Ἐσσηνοί, with the variants Ἰεσσοῖτοι, Ὀσσοῖτοι/Ὀσσηνοί in Epiphanius.

Hellenistic and Roman eras. He assigns writings purportedly advocating the ideology of the Enochic party—in effect practically all of the non-biblical writings recovered from the caves at Qumran—to the mysterious Jewish sect termed ‘Essenes’ discussed by Philo, Josephus, and other pagan and Christian authorities.<sup>21</sup> The category ‘Essene,’ invariably conflated with its presumed historical referent, forms a crucial component of Boccaccini’s argument: a close analysis of the most important Greek and Latin sources describing this group comprises the first major section of his book,<sup>22</sup> and he repeatedly invokes these testimonies as touchstones for assessing the alleged Enochic and/or Essenic propensities of various apocryphal and pseudepigraphic works. On the basis of these reports, together with a selective utilization of information gleaned from the Dead Sea Scrolls, he confidently delineates the historical and ideological vicissitudes of a religious trajectory within Second Temple Judaism which he terms ‘mainstream Essenism.’ Mainstream Essenism, according to Boccaccini, was the cultural locus for the expression of Enochic Judaism.

Since the initial decade of the scholarly study of the Dead Sea Scrolls, it has been largely accepted as a scholarly axiom that these recovered writings are to be associated in some fashion with the Essenes. The so-called ‘Essene hypothesis’ (signaled in Boccaccini’s title) holds that the community apparently resident at Qumran and who presumably was responsible for generating and depositing the scrolls found near that site should be identified with the Jewish sect of the Essenes mentioned in the Greek and Latin sources. Boccaccini endorses this suggested correlation as ‘compelling and conclusive.’<sup>23</sup> A number of comparative studies of the Qumran texts alongside the classical reports about Essenes have isolated some admittedly intriguing correspondences between the two groups of texts, but they have also identified a number of important differences. There is no need to list those items here, insofar as the standard discussions of the Qumran site and its associated scrolls treat this topic in some detail. Accordingly most scholars who accept this correlation have devised ingenious ways to argue an Essene identity for the Qumran sect despite these discrepancies, and Boccaccini is no exception. For him, the Qumran writings should be associated with an internal schism within a ‘mainstream Essenism’ which led to the establishment of a dissident outpost of Essene sectaries in the desert of Judaea. Josephus and Philo do not

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<sup>21</sup> These sources have been conveniently assembled in *Antike Berichte über die Essener* (2d ed.; ed. A. Adam and C. Burchard; Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1972).

<sup>22</sup> Boccaccini 21-49.

<sup>23</sup> Boccaccini 165.

speak of the desert site at Qumran because they are providing a generic portrait of ‘mainstream Essenism.’ Conversely, Qumran does not correspond in all particulars with the descriptions supplied in the Greek and Latin sources because its library allegedly attests to a small and ultimately ineffectual splinter movement within ‘mainstream Essenism,’ a fissure effected by the so-called ‘Teacher of Righteousness’ and his small band of followers.

Leaving aside for the moment the writings from Qumran and their posited affinities with one or more of the religious groups supposedly operative in Second Temple Judaism, I think that a pertinent question worth posing is whether in fact there was any such thing as an ‘Essene sect.’ I want to be perfectly clear, and hence I will proceed deliberately. I am *not* questioning the notion of the Greco-Latin semantic marker ‘Essene,’ one which when wielded by writers like Josephus, Philo, or Pliny served to invoke a very specific network of ideas and cultural competencies within the minds of a discerning imperial readership. That notion or category is undeniably present and meaningful when read within its proper ethnographic context. I am much less confident, however, about whether the label ‘Essene’ corresponded to an actual party, group, or movement within Second Temple Jewish society. There are several factors here which prompt my skepticism.

(a) There is not a single extant Palestinian or Syro-Mesopotamian Jewish writing authored in either Hebrew or Aramaic during the Achaemenid, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, or Sasanian periods which mentions an ‘Essene’ sect, categorizes a tradition or practice as ‘Essene,’ or employs the label ‘Essene’ in a recognizable way. The Bible apparently knows nothing of Essenes, although it does contribute to our knowledge about a variety of political and religious tensions coursing through and around Judaeon society during the age of the Second Temple. Parascriptural works—what Charles termed ‘Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament’—do not seem to use the term. Early Christian scriptures, some of which arguably may stem from Semitic *Vorlagen*, mention a number of Jewish sects, but the label ‘Essene’ is conspicuously absent.<sup>24</sup> Pre-geonic rabbinic literature is also remarkably mute about ‘Essenes’ as such, even though it is cognizant of most of the groups named in the New Testament, including the Christians themselves, and expands the accepted repertoire of sectarian trajectories by remarking the existence of

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<sup>24</sup> The New Testament acknowledges Pharisees and Sadducees most prominently, but also knows Samaritans, a group termed ‘Herodians,’ a circle associated with John the Baptist, and at least in Lk 6:15, Zealots.

various marginalized groups like the Baytusin (i.e., the Boethusians), the ‘morning-bathers,’ the ‘water-drinkers,’ and the ‘mourners for Zion.’ But perhaps the most damaging piece of evidence is this: the sectarian portion of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a corpus of texts popularly associated with Essene authorship, are replete with terms and phrases which function as designations for sect members, authority figures, and opponents, but nowhere among these rubrics do we find a cluster of phonemes that can confidently be correlated with the name ‘Essene.’

We are thus left with two alternatives for interpreting this unanimously negative body of evidence. We can either conclude that the Essene sect of Judaism is a chimera, or we can entertain the possibility that Essenism is actually encoded under some other designation or description within the native sources. Studies probing aspects of this latter alternative have produced some interesting insights, among which must be mentioned are those focusing on certain postbiblical references to a dissident named ‘Zadok’ and a radical sect of ‘Zadokites’ (צדוקיין), the frequent conflation or confusion within rabbinic sources between these same Zadokites and the Baytusin (ביתוסיין), and the intriguing notices recording the peculiar habits and practices associated with the so-called ‘Rechabites’ (בני רכב). Some have revived the ingenious theory advanced by the sixteenth-century Jewish scholar Azariah di Rossi that viewed the designation ‘Baytusin’ as a compound word comprised of the vocables ‘house, school’ (בית) and ‘(Es)senes’ (וסיין), analogous to expressions like ‘school of Hillel’ (בית הלל) or ‘school of Shammai’ (בית שמאי).<sup>25</sup> None of these scholars, however, have provided a compelling explanation for the semantic significance of the syllables ‘Us,’ ‘Usin’ or ‘Sin,’ even though the initial vowel would seem to reverberate in the unique spelling for ‘Essene’ supplied by the late fourth-century Christian bishop Epiphanius (Ἐπιφάνιος) within his remarkably idiosyncratic description of this sect.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, a legend embedded within *’Abot de-R. Natan* associates the rise of the Baytusin with a figure whose name was ‘Baytus’ (ביתוס) and who was, along with a like-minded colleague named Zadok, a prominent disciple of the early rabbinic sage Antigonus of Sokho (see *m. ’Abot* 1:3). According to this legend, a misunderstanding of their teacher’s lessons concerning the doctrine of divine rewards and punishments led to their rejection of rabbinic halakhah and their founding of the Baytusi and Zadokite ‘sects’ respectively.<sup>27</sup> One should note, as some already have, that this close

<sup>25</sup> Azariah di Rossi, *Me’or ’Enayim* (3 vols.; Vilna, 1866; reprinted, Jerusalem: Maqor, 1970) 1.90-97.

<sup>26</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 19.1.1-4.10; 5.1.6ff.; 20.3.1-4. See Adam-Burchard, *Essener*<sup>2</sup> 52-53.

<sup>27</sup> *’Abot R. Natan* A §5; *ibid.* B §10 (ed. Schechter 13b).

legendary association of the figures of Zadok and Baytus goes some way toward explaining the frequent alternation of the designations ‘Zadokite’ and ‘Baytusi’ in rabbinic sources.<sup>28</sup>

There are admittedly some tantalizing tidbits of testimonia to be found within rabbinic literature that point suggestively toward the types of behavioral and exegetical patterns found among the sectarian Scrolls and even the classical reports about Essenes. Yet it remains the case that none of these reports or discussions explicitly invoke the lexeme ‘Essene,’ and so these testimonia are ultimately inconclusive with regard to the viability of an Essene sect within the Jewish world in late antiquity.

(b) A superficial perusal of the table of contents of a comprehensive collection of the classical (i.e., Greek and Latin) descriptions of the Jewish sect of the Essenes can leave an unwary reader with the mistaken impression that the primary sources for a scholastic reconstruction of Essene ideology are manifold and grounded on an extensive series of empirical observations and experiences. In actual fact, though, it is extremely improbable that any of the extant tradents who speak of a Jewish sect of Essenes, including our earliest authorities Philo and Josephus, write on the basis of such knowledge. A comparative study of these sources easily demonstrates that apart from certain idiosyncratic deviations which largely reflect individual theological or rhetorical concerns they are almost totally derivative from the first-century narratives of Philo, Josephus, and possibly Pliny. However, this discernible literary kinship need not always be explained as one of direct filiation with the aforementioned first-century sources. For example, it is most likely that the account of the Essenes supplied by the early third-century church father Hippolytus was derived not from Josephus, but instead from the same source which Josephus had used and adapted in his works.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, a closer look at the reports of Philo and Josephus reveals some intriguing verbal and conceptual linkages between them suggestive in turn of *their* mutual literary reliance upon an earlier Greek source,<sup>30</sup> a source which moreover contains some curious misconstruals of Jewish practices which would

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<sup>28</sup> For a convenient overview of these issues, see R. Harari, “Boethusians,” *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (2 vols.; ed. L.H. Schiffman and J.C. VanderKam; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 1.100-102.

<sup>29</sup> This possibility was first suggested in the mid-nineteenth century and has been repeated many times since. For the basic references, see K. Kohler, “Essenes,” *JE* 5.228; M. Smith, “The Description of the Essenes in Josephus and the *Philosophumena*” *HUCA* 29 (1958) 273-313; M. Black, *The Scrolls and Christian Origins: Studies in the Jewish Background of the New Testament* (New York, 1961; reprinted, Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983) 187-91.

<sup>30</sup> See P. Bilde, “The Essenes in Philo and Josephus,” *Qumran Between the Old and New Testaments* (JSOTSup 290; ed. F.H. Cryer and T.L. Thompson; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 32-68, esp. 62-65.

be odd were they to occur in an authentic Jewish writing. It seems more probable that this source which would have discussed the Essenes emanated from a gentile writer.<sup>31</sup> It has been determined that the most likely candidate for authoring such a source is the Herodian court biographer Nicolaus of Damascus.<sup>32</sup>

Among the surviving works of Nicolaus are fragments from a semi-anthropological compilation entitled the *Collection of Remarkable Customs*.<sup>33</sup> The genre of this work was a popular one in Greek historiography, and its general nature is familiar to us from the morass of travelogues, tall tales, gossip, and sensationalist journalism excerpted and promulgated by historians and geographers like Herodotus, Strabo, and Diodorus Siculus. It apparently supplied a description for Hellenes of the strange sights, places, laws, and customs to be met among a variety of African and Asian barbarian peoples, among whom he included presumably the Jews. We know that Josephus used writings authored by Nicolaus during the preparation of his own *oeuvre*,<sup>34</sup> and hence it is likely he was familiar with his *Customs*. Although he nowhere explicitly cites Nicolaus as an authority, Philo too undoubtedly relied on his *Customs*, for in his discussion of the Therapeutae, a Jewish community similar to or identical with the Essenes, he compares them to the Scythian band of Galactophagi mentioned in the *Iliad* of Homer, repeating in that context an unusual interpretation of the Homeric verse that is found elsewhere only in a surviving fragment of the *Customs* of Nicolaus.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the alleged ‘testimonia’ of both Josephus and Philo must be assessed with a fair amount of suspicion. Josephus notoriously exaggerates his own importance and cultural prowess within the political and religious hierarchies of Judaeae society. Philo is physically and culturally separate from religious life in Eretz Israel, and one must be extremely circumspect when gauging his worth for recovering an accurate depiction of Jewish intellectual life in the diaspora. Factors such as these render it highly probable that both Josephus and Philo obtain their information about a Jewish sect of Essenes not from personal observation or experience, but from a non-Jewish literary source.

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<sup>31</sup> Note Smith, *HUCA* 29 (1958) 292: ‘... it may be observed that the common source, whatever its language, was a typical piece of Greek ethnography of the sort made popular by Herodotus and frequent in the later historical and geographical writers. Moreover, it was a document presumably composed for Gentiles and possibly—perhaps even, probably—written by a Gentile.’

<sup>32</sup> See W. Bauer, “Essener,” *RE*, Suppl. IV 408; G. Hölscher, *Die Quellen des Josephus für die Zeit von Exil bis zum jüdischen Krieg* (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1904) 8, 14-16; B.Z. Wacholder, *Nicolaus of Damascus* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962) 71-72.

<sup>33</sup> See Wacholder, *Nicolaus* 31.

<sup>34</sup> Josephus, *Contra Apionum* 2.84; *Ant.* 1.94-95, 108, 159-60; 7.101-103; 12.127; 13.250-51, 347; 14.9; etc.

<sup>35</sup> Wacholder, *Nicolaus* 71.

Some might counter that the information about Essenes that is supplied by Pliny (and perhaps also Dio Chrysostom) derives from an independent source which is based on an eyewitness account, since he, unlike Josephus and Philo, actually situates his Essenes in the vicinity of the Dead Sea, and as some scholars have argued, perhaps even at the very site of Qumran. On the face of it this seems like strong evidence for veracity, but its force begins to collapse under critical pressure. It already presumes the truth of what it is purportedly attempting to show; namely, that Pliny's Essenes and the Qumran desert dwellers are in fact the same community. Pliny's notice however exhibits a number of crucial similarities with the reports provided by Josephus and Philo with regard to the alleged antiquity of the group, the awe in which its members are held by their host societies, and the supererogatory piety displayed by members of the group, critical points of contact also emphasized by Boccaccini in his attempt to argue for the report's veracity. However, these similarities and overlaps should instead raise the question whether Pliny too is ultimately reliant upon a literary source for his information about the Essenes, perhaps even the same literary source exploited by Josephus and Philo. A question such as this one is difficult to resolve satisfactorily, but there is one piece of suggestive evidence which points to the distinct possibility that both Josephus and Pliny cribbed a common source for their presentations of Levantine wonders and tourist attractions. Interestingly, both Pliny and Josephus share a reference to a 'sabbatical river' (Σαββατικόν),<sup>36</sup> a purportedly natural marvel that will soon re-emerge in the Alexander Romance of Pseudo-Callisthenes as the 'river of sand'<sup>37</sup> and in later Jewish folklore as the River Sambatyon. What is even more interesting is that it is the gentile writer Pliny who supplies the correct explanation for its Jewishly inspired name; namely, that it ceases its flow every seventh day, whereas Josephus inexplicably describes it as dry for six days and flowing only on the seventh! Regardless of how we might go about resolving this anomaly, it seems reasonable to conclude that both Josephus and Pliny have extracted their reports about a 'sabbatical river' from an earlier source containing descriptions of oriental marvels and wonders, a source in fact much like the previously mentioned *Collection of Remarkable Customs* of Nicolaus of Damascus.<sup>38</sup> It seems barely possible that their information about 'Essenes' may stem from the same source.

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<sup>36</sup> Pliny, *Naturalis historia* 31.11; Josephus, *Bellum* 7.96-99.

<sup>37</sup> Book II, chapter 30.

<sup>38</sup> The phenomenon of a water source observing the Sabbath is not limited to this Syrian river. According to the fourth-century so-called 'pilgrim of Bordeaux,' the pool of Siloam in Jerusalem also exhibits the same behavior. See L. Casson, *Travel in the Ancient World* (London, 1974; repr., Baltimore and London:

(c) Finally, and more speculatively, I would like to suggest that modern scholars have been unduly credulous about the actual existence of a Jewish Essene sect. Since the era of Hecataeus and Herodotus, a popular *Tendenz* in classical ethnography was the description of a number of elite or secretive castes of religious and/or intellectual functionaries supposedly flourishing among various barbarian peoples who inhabited the fringes of the Greco-Roman *oikumene*. Prominent examples of such castes would be the druids of Gaul and ancient Celtic society, the Magi of Persia, the Chaldeans of Mesopotamia, and the so-called ‘naked philosophers’ or gymnosophists of India. At times they dwell interspersed among their respective *ethnoi*, but sometimes they exist in segregated isolation from their respective societies, and there are occasionally instances of groups who can be found in the far reaches of the inhabited world where they comprise utopian conventicles.<sup>39</sup> Regardless of their alleged physical location within or apart from their societies, Greek and Latin accounts about these groups exhibit a general family resemblance: members of these groups typically experience a marvelous longevity, they are dedicated to lives of piety and holiness, they are cultural repositories of priestly and philosophical wisdom, and they are adept in a number of useful arts, crafts, and technologies, among which the oracular sciences are prominently numbered. The ‘Essenes’ and Philo’s Therapeutae are clearly marketed as the Jewish representatives of this ethnological trope.

Students of early Christian and medieval Muslim heresiography and historiography are thoroughly familiar with this literary tactic. The pre-modern historians of these religions will sometimes fabricate artificial ‘sects’ in order to provide a communal framework for certain disreputable ideas or practices, or invent fictive heresiarchs so as to assign blame for critical disputes and schisms. One thinks of shadowy groups or figures like the ‘Simonians,’ the ‘Sethians,’ ‘Dustai,’ and ‘Ebion.’ The Qur’ānic ‘Sabians’ can be fit within this scheme. Medieval Muslim heresiography constructs the ‘Barahima,’ a sect which supposedly denied the validity of prophecy, and the Jewish Maghārīyya, ‘so called,’ Qirqisānī says, ‘because their writings were found in a cave.’<sup>40</sup> Utopian currents are visible as well in these later

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The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994) 308. This latter notice may however reflect a confused garbling of the ‘miraculous’ ebb and flow of the Siloam waters as described in the hagiographic *vita* of Isaiah found in the Byzantine pseudepigraphon *Lives of the Prophets*. See David Satran, *Biblical Prophets in Byzantine Palestine: Reassessing the Lives of the Prophets* (SVTP 11; Leiden: Brill, 1995) 121.

<sup>39</sup> See D. Mendels, “Hellenistic Utopia and the Essenes,” *HTR* 72 (1979) 207-22, whose conclusions I nevertheless firmly reject.

<sup>40</sup> Qirqisānī, *K. al-anwār* (ed. Nemoy) 1.12.1. See J.C. Reeves, “Exploring the Afterlife of Jewish Pseudepigrapha in Medieval Near Eastern Traditions: Some Initial Soundings,” *JSJ* 30 (1999) 161-62. For

literatures. The wicked Nimrod becomes an adept in and apostle of magical mysteries after his three-year sojourn on the eastern shore of Okeanos among the people of Yonton, the fourth son of Noah.<sup>41</sup> According to the hermit Zosimus, the prophet Jeremiah's 'Rechabites' are able to maintain their strict regimen in the guise of Christian monks living in a 'blessed land' located at the ends of the earth.<sup>42</sup>

One wonders then how much credence should be granted such analogous 'testimonia' about the formal existence of a pietist elite within Second Temple Jewry? I would counsel very little. To be sure, I would in no way deny that individual pietists were active within or at the margins of Jewish society—I am questioning only the existential status of a distinctive social aggregate bearing the name 'Essene.' In order to sharpen this point and to urge caution among those who would blithely accept the historicity of a Jewish Essene sect solely on the basis of one (or more) literary source(s), I introduce here for consideration a series of semi-anthropological descriptive excerpts taken from a medieval account about a Jewish group, allegedly to be found somewhere east of Palestine, who are most frequently called the *beney Mosheh* (Arabic *Banū Mūsā*) or 'the children of Moses.'<sup>43</sup> The account, one which enjoyed great popularity in medieval folkloristic and apocalyptic collections, belongs among a group of writings associated with the mysterious figure of Eldad ha-Dani, a traveling messianic agitator of the eighth or ninth century.<sup>44</sup>

'the levitical *beney Mosheh*: they are encamped east of the River  
Sa(m)batyon ... no unclean animal or bird or creeping thing can be found  
among them; they have with them (only) their flocks and cattle. Six springs  
are there whose waters they have collected into a pool which they constructed,

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the likely fictitious nature of this sect, see S.M. Wasserstrom, "Shahrastani on the Maghariyya," *Israel Oriental Studies* 17 (1998) 127-55.

<sup>41</sup> *La Caverne des Trésors: Les deux recensions syriaques* (CSCO scriptores syri 207; ed. S.-M. Ri; Lovanii: E. Peeters, 1987) 208-17 (§27). See S. Gero, "The Legend of the Fourth Son of Noah," *HTR* 73 (1980) 321-30.

<sup>42</sup> See *The History of the Rechabites, Volume I: The Greek Recension* (ed. J.H. Charlesworth; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982); also *OTP* 2.443-61.

<sup>43</sup> In addition to the *Yerahmeel* excerpt quoted below, see A. Jellinek, ed., *Bet ha-Midrash* (6 vols.; Leipzig and Vienna, 1853-77; repr., Jerusalem: Bamberger & Wahrmann, 1938) 2.103-105; 3.9-11; 5.18-20; 6.15-16; H. Albeck, ed., *Midrash Bereshit Rabbati* (Jerusalem: Mekitze Nirdamim, 1940) 124; Oxford Bodl. Ms. Opp. 603 fols. 41b-42a; Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-milal wa-al-niḥal* (2 vols.; ed. M. b. Fath Allāh Badrān; [Cairo]: Matba'at al-Azhar, [1951-55]) 1.507; Qazwīnī, *'Ajā'ib al-makhlūqāt wa-gharā'ib al-mawjūdāt* (see *Zakariya Ben Muhammed Ben Mahmud el-Cazwini's Kosmographie* [2 vols.; ed. F. Wüstenfeld; Göttingen, 1848-49; reprinted, Wiesbaden: Martin Sändig, 1967] 2.18).

<sup>44</sup> A. Epstein, *Eldad ha-Dani* (Pressburg:, 1891), cf. *Kitvei R. Avraham Epstein* (2 vols.; ed. A.M. Habermann; Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1949-56) 1.1-211, 357-90; A. Neubauer, "Where Are the Ten Tribes? II. Eldad the Danite," *JQR* o.s. 1 (1888-89) 95-114; A. Shochat, "Eldad ha-Dani," *EncJud* 6.576-78.

and they irrigate their land from the pool. All types of pure fish flourish in it (the pool), and by the springs and the pool flourish all kinds of pure waterfowl. They enjoy all kinds of fruits: (the fertility of the land is such that) whoever plants one seed harvests a hundredfold. They are religiously observant, each of them learned in Torah, Bible, Mishnah, and Aggadah. They are ‘pure pietists’ (טהורים חסידיים). None of them ever swears a false oath. They live to be one hundred and twenty years old, and a son or daughter never dies during the lifespan of their father: they witness the succession of three or four generations. They construct their own houses and do their own sowing and harvesting because they have no slaves or maidservants. They never lock their doors at night. A very small child might go and tend their cattle for a number of days, and no one will be in the least bit anxious, for there are no thieves or dangerous wild animals or pests, and there are no demons or anything that might cause harm. Because they are holy and persist in the sanctity revealed by our teacher Moses, He (God) has granted all this to them and chosen them ... and they will remain there until the time of the Eschaton.’<sup>45</sup>

I would suggest that it might prove instructive to begin situating and studying the classical accounts about the Essenes in tandem with the recurrent testimonies and traditions we find in late antique and medieval Jewish, Christian, and Muslim sources about utopian pietist groups like the *beney Mosheh*, the Rechabites, and the Maghārīyya. Z. Safrai has already pointed to some interesting connections linking the biblical and rabbinic discussions of the adherents of Yehonadab b. Recab with behavioral and doctrinal aspects of the Essene and Qumran sects.<sup>46</sup> Patristic sources (see Nilus of Ankara; the Byzantine *Suda*)<sup>47</sup> probe the Essene-Rechabite axis even further, and there are versions of the Eldad ha-Dani legend which link the Rechabites with the *beney Moshe*.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> I have translated excerpts from a passage found in Oxford Ms. Heb. d. 11 (2797), the *Sefer ha-Zikronot* or the so-called *Chronicles of Yeraḥmeel*. See E. Yassif, ed., *Sefer ha-Zikronot hu’ Divrey ha-Yamim le-Yeraḥme’el* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2001) 220-21.

<sup>46</sup> Z. Safrai, “The Sons of Yehonadav ben Rekhav and the Essenes,” *Bar Ilan Annual* 16-17 (1979) 37-58.

<sup>47</sup> See Adam-Burchard, *Essener*<sup>2</sup> 56-59.

<sup>48</sup> See the sources assembled by I. Friedlaender, “The Jews of Arabia and the Rechabites,” *JQR* n.s. 1 (1910-11) 252-57.

It does not require a trained eye to see that there exist a number of conceptual and thematic similarities between the descriptions provided by classical sources of the Essenes (or other barbarian 'utopian' communities) and that of Eldad ha-Dani on the 'children of Moses.' Yet to my knowledge no responsible post-Enlightenment thinker has ever seriously maintained that the latter group really existed, or sought to attribute any Jewish literature to their creative pens. Why then should the Essenes be so uncritically privileged?