

Secret groups in ancient Judaism

Introduction

This remarkable book begins with the question, where there “secret societies” in Second Temple Judaism? The author answers in the affirmative. What he seems to fail to recognize is that the affirmation is much broader than simply that. Of course there were secret societies in Second Temple Judaism; just as there were secret societies in First Temple Judaism, and just as there are secret societies in present day Judaism. I am writing these words from such a secret society. The concept of secrecy is just as fundamental to Judaism as is Genesis, and always has been. The acrostic for Judaic learning is P’eh, Resh, Dalit, Someh; pronounced PARDES (orchard) and meaning PSHAT, REMEZ, DRASH, SOD – simple, hint, allegory and secret. Anyone who learns Judaism without SOD has only P’eh, Resh, Dalit, which is PERED – a mule. ALL Judaism is based (along with the aforementioned) upon learning secrets and this is always done from within a society of secrets that are passed down in an organised and controlled manner – THAT is the meaning of the term Qabalah (receipt). The other three, the first three, can be learned ‘simply’ from books, even (at least to some extent) by oneself. SOD, MUST be learned ONLY from within a secret society, by law – by Mosaic Law, from Moshe, from Sinai. One cannot get any more basic than this – not “ancient Judaism” but basic Judaism, now and for every time.



Figure 1 Secret groups in ancient Judaism.

On page 3 our author states, “No insider source relating to other groups survived...” Indeed, a most strange statement. I am, of course, aware of a great deal of such “insider” information. My guess is that “survived” in this case, mean what certain “outsider groups choose to acknowledge; where such information is not acknowledged, it therefore did not survive. On page 4: “In the ancient Greco-Roman world, as is subsequently demonstrated, Jews and non-Jews who knew secrets kept them faithfully and punctiliously.” This is an excellent observation; but why does the author add “In ancient Greco-Roman world”? We keep them today, just as punctiliously. Again, there seems to be here a certain dissonance with the realities of the world of Judaism as actually practiced, today. I wish to emphasise that I picked

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up the book because of its curious title, and I read it carefully, from cover-to-cover, because I was trying to figure out what makes this author think in the ways that are shown here. The book is fascinating, but problematical for those who come to it with an actual knowledge of the subject matter. Now the debate should be what actually the subject matter of the book IS and does the title actually reflect that?

Subchapter 3.1, “Knowledge and the Control of Knowledge” is a case in point. The section is well-written and valuable. The adage “knowledge is power” is well-known and is shown here to have a sociological aspect that many may not be aware of, and thus well worth reading. Subchapter 3.2 begins with a reference to the traitor Josephus. Josephus was not deemed a person worthy of trust. Bentwich¹ showed a century ago that his unfortunate appointment was attained as a result of nepotism, and not by individual worth. Josephus was not deemed worthy of trust, and was not trusted with any sect secrets. He did not grow up in the traditions of the Beit Midrash and had no training. In detective work, as in intelligence work, the adage “You only know what you know” is always applicable. Our author’s claim (page 38) that “Josephus stresses transmissions of written documents, when he says explicitly that the Essene initiates swear not to reveal ‘books belonging to their sect’.” Firstly, Josephus was not an initiate and can have had no knowledge of what initiates really did or did not swear; at best he may have ‘heard’ something. As everyone knows, hearsay is exactly worthless without corroborating evidence. Secondly, we know that Josephus frequently lied; he had no choice once his life was dependent upon the Flavian dynasty.

Thirdly, all of Josephus works were heavily redacted by the Church and is Lateran Monks, an army of trained forgers, for hundreds of years.² Even what he wrote, he may not have written, it is now impossible to guess what was actually written by Josephus, what was later forged; what he witnessed, and what is simply an invention of either his fertile imagination or that of the Church, for its own reasons. In any case, what he said, can at best, be taken at face value, and any “assumptions” based upon this is pure speculation of not scientific value. Josephus said nothing about moral teachings because he had no way of knowing that such (still) exists.

Page 54, “In considering this question, we can speculate that if we know of two such secret societies, and we do, there may have been more. Did more secret groups and traditions of learning exist

¹Bentwich N. Josephus. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, chapter II; 1914.

²Johnson Paul. The Offshore Islanders: from Roman Occupation to European Entry. In: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, editors. London: 1972.

than those that the well-known ‘outsider sources,’ such as Josephus, the new testament or Philo of Alexandria, mention?” This question contradicts what the author stated previously, and is here quoted: “Jews ... who knew secrets kept them faithfully and punctiliously.” Indeed, we do keep such secrets. So yes, other “secret groups” did and do, and always have existed, as stated above. “As we have said, it is a basic characteristic of esoteric and secret groups in society that the group’s special knowledge, practice, or both were not revealed to outsiders.” [Page 71]; indeed, I heartily agree, other than with the ‘past tense’ form. On pages 75-76, the author states: “This is a striking statement, particularly when compared with Enoch’s calling out in his sleep in 1 Enoch 83:5-6. That text describes Enoch as talking prophetically in his sleep, as a result of which Mahalalel addresses him. These statements are unparalleled in other Jewish texts of the Second Temple period, although dream visions are widespread and well known.” This statement is more than just problematical; it is absolutely incorrect and wholly misleading. *Sepher Heichalot* is a well-known Second Temple series of documents (well-known to initiates, not to the general public). They are entirely based upon dream prophesy. On the other hand, the book of Enoch is not accepted by Jews and no evidence exist that it ever was seriously considered. In other words, it is a false reference, to a document with ‘highly shady’ antecedents – again, heavily redacted and forged by the Church. So, the author here ignores accepted lore, and compares instead to know falsity.

Chapter 5, page 78, “Secret teaching and/or practice is the central feature of secret societies. The secret group must guard carefully against the danger of the improper revelation of these secrets. Indeed, that is the purpose at the root of the group’s very existence.” Quite the opposite! The issue of secrecy is significant, but the first and primary purpose at the root of the group’s existence is propagation of the special knowledge that the group is responsible for – the proper propagation, of course, but our author here has reversed priorities. I believe that to be very revealing. Page 80, footnote 8: “Extreme positions on issues of purity were typical of the *haburot* and...also of certain sects mentioned in rabbinic literature.” I must say that anyone

who is not intimately familiar with issues of purity knows nothing about Judaism, then or now. Avot even states that purity is the most central theme of Judaism. Page 82 again emphasises the difference between real Judaism and statements made by persons from hearsay. It is completely, factually incorrect. I must emphasise that I completely agree that study of Qumran documents is important; but study of them out of context is absurd and leads to layers of absurdities.

Illustrative anecdote

In the south Israel town of Dimona there exist a group of very nice and personable people, who call themselves “Black Hebrews”. They are not Jewish, they are a group of a few hundred folks who ‘escaped’ from their lives in mid-twentieth century Chicago and made their way to Israel. They take no real part in Israeli society. Let us surmise in a thousand years, an archaeologist comes along and ‘discovers’ a trove of their writings. Now, these will all then be a thousand years old, making them both fascinating and “original.” If this archaeologist then concludes that these represent the “real” Israeli society and that all other evidence (except what he finds convenient) is ignored, he would be quite foolish. These people, with all that they are very nice folks, are completely separate from society. The Qumran people were probably nice folks. They were completely separate from Israeli/Judean society. Other people in the society wished to have nothing to do with them, and they wished to have nothing to do with society – but they did not live in a vacuum. Clearly, they were aware of the politics (they were entirely erased by Rome during its decimation of the country) just as they were aware of the religious milieu. They clearly knew the Mishna, written about the same time – for instance the author expresses wonderment that they had a documented order of speaking – something clearly delineated in Mishna.

Conclusion

I would say that this book is curious and is probably worth reading, but should not be taken over seriously, because it is rife with assumptions that are based upon seemingly wilful lack of real knowledge of the religious milieu of Judaism, then or now.