

adding certain details about ritual immersion practices and various priest-like habits. He names the Essenes alongside the Pharisees and the Sadducees, two larger sects. A fourth mention comes from the later philosopher and historian Dio Chrysostom, but Elior says he could have copied references from earlier sources.

PROF. JAMES CHARLESWORTH, director of the Dead Sea Scrolls project at Princeton Theological Seminary and an expert on Josephus, says he is “relatively certain that Josephus did not invent the Essenes.” He tells *The Report* that Philo, who lived before Josephus, wrote a document that was originally entitled “Concerning the Essenes” and that Pliny described where the Essenes lived. He says, “Both Philo and Pliny antedate Josephus’s long description of the Essenes.” Charlesworth is satisfied that they and other early historians and theologians (eight sources altogether, he claims) describe the habits and ideas of the Essenes.

Going into detail, Charlesworth says that Josephus mentions 120 features of the Essenes and he has found over 100 of them in the Scrolls composed at Qumran. He has no doubts that the Qumranites are the Essenes and believes that the scroll known as the “Rule of the Community” relates to the sect’s Spartan lifestyle. He contends that at least one proof of Essene authorship of the Dead Sea Scrolls is the large number of ink pots found by archaeologists at Qumran.

But Elior claims that Philo and Pliny the Elder either borrowed from each other or recycled legends as fact. “Pliny describes the

There is no mention of the Essenes in the Dead Sea Scrolls or in contemporary literature written in the Land of Israel such as the Apocrypha, sages, or the New Testament, says Elior. Nor is it reasonable to assume that thou-

which are replete with references to priestly life, ritual and calendar?”

If there ever were such a group as Essenes, she asks finally, “what was the name of their leader, when were they formed and why?” No

‘It is absurd to think that for so many years, such a large group of people, numbering in the thousands, led a celibate life, which is against the Jewish imperative to ‘go forth and multiply’ and are hardly ever mentioned’

– Prof. Rachel Elior



Hebrew source, Elior continues, “mentions a group that rejected slavery, denounced weapons, extolled chastity and resented commerce. No Hebrew or Aramaic word is related to the word Essenes or ‘Essaioi,’ as the group is known in Greek.”

Curator Roitman advances the theory that “Essene” could come from the Hebrew verb *‘la’asot* (to do), a word that appears in the scrolls, where the writers describe themselves as “*osei torah*,” or “those who carry out the law.” Charlesworth is not bothered that the name Essene does not appear in the scrolls themselves or in the New Testament. “No one should expect the Dead Sea Scrolls to mention the Essenes, a Greek word. The Scrolls composed at Qumran are in Hebrew and Aramaic; the Qumranites never composed in Greek.” Indeed, he goes on, the compositions of the Qumranites

are often in the priestly tradition. “When they refer to themselves, it’s as ‘men of holiness’ or ‘sons of light’, concepts which co-exist in New Testament documents, and relate to terms used in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the way the Qumranites define themselves,” he says. Elior’s suggestion that the Dead Sea Scrolls were written by the Sadducees, is not new, adds Charlesworth, but unlikely just the same, he says.

As the scholars pursue their learned wrangling there’s at least one question that will take not an archaeologist, nor a historian of mysticism, nor a philologist but a psychologist to answer: What is it about the doings and writings of a tiny sect that may not have even existed that fascinates people so much that it still makes front page news two millennia later? ●

‘I don’t see any reason to refute careful scholarship which says that the Essenes existed and wrote the scrolls’

– Dr. Adolfo Roitman, curator of the Shrine of the Book

Essenes as ‘choosing the company of date palms’ beside the Dead Sea, but he probably never visited Israel,” she says. Elior complains that criticism of her theory “usually comes from opponents who have only read Josephus and the other classical references to the Essenes,” she says. “They should read the Dead Sea Scrolls. The proof is there.”

sands of people had lived as celibates in the Land of Israel for many generations with no private property or commerce, “while there is no reference to this in any Hebrew or Aramaic text.” Moreover, she asks, how is it possible to identify the Essenes, “who have apparently nothing to do with priestly laws or priestly heritage with the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls,