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Review of *Out of the Cave: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Dead Sea Scrolls Research*, by Edna Ullmann-Margalit

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*Out of the Cave: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Dead Sea Scrolls Research*, by Edna Ullmann-Margalit. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. 167 pp., 2 figures, 7 photographs. Cloth. \$45.00.

Edna Ullmann-Margalit, a professor of the philosophy of science<sup>1</sup> at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, has turned her interest in the Dead Sea Scrolls into a fascinating study of the scholarship on the Dead Sea Scrolls. As she makes clear in the introduction (p. 17), Ullmann-Margalit makes no claim to expertise in the Scrolls, but is rather engaged in “second-order” scholarship; her subject is the study of the Scrolls.

The book is divided into an introduction and three chapters: Chapter 1, “Writings and Ruins: The Essene Connection”; Chapter 2, “A Hard Look at ‘Hard Facts’: The Archaeology of Qumran”; and Chapter 3, “Sects and Scholars.” In the introduction, Ullmann-Margalit lays out her primary goal, which is “to subject to scrutiny the inner logic of the main theory of Qumran studies as well as of the rival theories.” The main theory is the Qumran-Essene hypothesis, which Ullmann-Margalit defines as follows: “the scrolls found in the caves [in the vicinity of Qumran] belonged to the sect of the Essenes and that the Essene center, or ‘motherhouse,’ was at the nearby site of Khirbet Qumran” (p. 23). As Ullmann-Margalit notes, this hypothesis can be broken down into three constituent elements, which she puts in the form of questions: Why Essenes? Why Qumran? Why a sect? (p. 16). Each of these questions is addressed in the following chapters.

What most interested this reviewer was the way in which Ullmann-Margalit, as a philosopher, investigated the staying power of, and unpacked the inner logic behind, the Qumran-Essene hypothesis. She is well aware that most Dead Sea Scrolls scholars are

not logicians or trained in scientific methodology, so she does not waste her time criticizing Scrolls scholarship for its lack of hard, scientific methodology (a criticism sometimes leveled from other quarters). Rather, she takes Scrolls scholarship as a “soft” discipline (even though the archaeology of Qumran deals with “hard” data, the interpretation of that data is still soft, or “fungible” [p. 60]), and proceeds from there.

Ullmann-Margalit notes that the Qumran-Essene hypothesis, from the very beginning of Scrolls scholarship in 1948, has been the dominant hypothesis explaining the evidence of both the Scrolls themselves and the archaeology of Qumran. All other hypotheses have gained only a handful of adherents, and most have been dismissed out of hand. (Discussing her interactions with Scrolls scholars, Ullmann-Margalit makes an astute observation concerning “the eerie feeling one sometimes gets, that in dealing with the Dead Sea scrolls one is facing a sectarian phenomenon not only as regards the authors of the scrolls, but as regards their researchers as well” [p. 18].) She notes that the Qumran-Essene hypothesis is “thick”; that is, the interplay of texts (both the Scrolls themselves and the classical sources Josephus, Philo, and Pliny) and archaeology form a “strong linkage” argument, in which the chain is stronger than any of its links (pp. 48-49). The links of the chain are laid out in two strands of argument. The first strand concerns the texts: the contents of the scrolls found in the caves are compatible with the ancient descriptions of the Essenes, so therefore the scrolls are Essene. The second strand concerns the archaeology: the site of Qumran is

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank my husband, Dan D. Crawford, of the Philosophy Department at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, for helping me to clarify my understanding and usage of the philosophical terms found in this review.

compatible with Pliny's location of the Essenes, therefore the Qumran occupants were Essene. What draws these two strands together into a single chain is the argument that the site of Qumran is anomalous in Roman Palestine and can be interpreted as the site of a Jewish religious community. Thus the conclusion can be reached (and the final link in the chain forged) that the occupants of Qumran were Essene and that they owned the scrolls found in the eleven caves surrounding Qumran. This linkage forms "a [hermeneutic] circle that connects several rich elements" (pp. 47-50).

As Ullmann-Margalit states, no link in this chain has been unchallenged, but no link has been decidedly broken (p. 53). One of the reasons for this is that the hypothesis has proved to be elastic, which is a sign of strength. Scrolls scholarship has co-opted challenges to the prevailing hypothesis and incorporated them into the hypothesis, the result of which has been that the hypothesis has been constantly and subtly redefined (p. 55). As examples of this constant redefinition, Ullmann-Margalit cites the description of the Essenes (moving from reliance on Josephus, Philo, and Pliny to a description that begins with the evidence of the Scrolls and brings in the classical sources only secondarily) and the understanding of the composition of the Qumran library (from a belief that all the documents were authored [or copied] at Qumran by its inhabitants to a more broadly based, eclectic notion of the collection) (pp. 55-60).

Another reason for the staying power of the hypothesis is its adherence to the "principle of total evidence," which necessitates considering both texts and archaeology (p. 62). Thus, scholars who attempt to separate the texts and the archaeology and interpret one without reference to the other are violating this principle, which calls on "a rational person to believe the hypothesis best supported by all available relevant evidence" (p. 62). Here Ullmann-Margalit approvingly quotes Jodi Magness, "Qumran provides a unique opportunity to use archaeological evidence combined with the information from ancient historical sources and scrolls to reconstruct and understand the life of a community" (p. 62).

Ullmann-Margalit's discussion of the resiliency of the Qumran-Essene hypothesis reminded this reviewer of the contemporary discussion concerning evolution. Evolution is a scientific theory that provides the best explanation for and understanding of all the available evidence (data). It too has been attacked on many occasions, but yet has proved resilient, because it is both "thick" and "elastic" (to use Ullmann-Margalit's terms). The degree of popular interest in evolution, like Dead Sea Scrolls research, is also driven at least in part by religious concerns, and many of the attacks on it come from those defending their religious preconceptions.

Although I greatly enjoyed this book, I did have some criticisms. The most important is that the book does not contain a conclusion. Ullmann-Margalit's last chapter concerns the question of whether or not it is legitimate to refer to the Qumran community as a sect (she concludes that it is; p. 120). She then goes on to discuss several conceptual issues, such as the impact of scholarly bias on Scrolls interpretation. However, she never draws all of her discussions together into a final conclusion. The reader is left dangling, so to speak, and forced to draw the conclusions for him- or herself.

Ullmann-Margalit seems much more comfortable discussing archaeology than texts; as a result the book is heavily weighted toward archaeology, and the various discussions of texts seem rather thin. A more even-handed discussion would improve the argument.

Finally, the few photographs used for illustration are poorly reproduced. They are dark and grainy, and anyone unfamiliar with the site of Qumran would be hard-pressed to identify the images. In these days of digital reproduction, Harvard University Press should be able to do better than that.

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