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THE USE OF CRYPTOGRAPHIC AND ESOTERIC SCRIPTS IN SECOND TEMPLE JUDAISM AND THE SURROUNDING CULTURES

Stephen Pfann

They wrote what was dictated, in characters which they did not know.

(4 Ezra 14:42)

In 4 Ezra 14, Ezra commissioned five scribes to spend forty days recording a revelation from God on wax tablets.1 The resulting books were intended to replace and elucidate copies of the books of the Law that had been burned.

He answered me and said, “Go and gather the people, and tell them not to seek you for forty days. But prepare for yourself many writing tablets, and take with you Sarea, Dabria, Selemia, Ethanus, and Asiel—these five, because they are trained to write rapidly; and you shall come here, and I will light in your heart the lamp of understanding, which shall not be put out until what you are about to write is finished. And when you have finished, some things you shall make public, and some you shall deliver in secret to the wise; tomorrow at this hour you shall begin to write.”

(4 Ezra 14:23–26)

These scribes were chosen because they were trained to write rapidly (14:24). This would normally mean that they took dictation either in cursive or in a form of shorthand known as tachygraphy. The presence of tachygraphy in the ancient world is well known, with evidence of the practice appearing first in Greek, from the fifth century B.C.E. onwards.2 One or two second-century C.E. manuscripts from Wadi Murabba‘at

(Mur 164a and 164b) illustrate that shorthand was used in a Jewish setting in Judea during the Roman Period, albeit on parchment and not on the usual papyrus or wax tablet.³

³ Józef T. Milik, “Document en Tachygraphie Grecque,” DJD II, 275–77; figs. 30, 31; pls. CIII, CIV.
However, as the story proceeds, it appears that Ezra’s dictation did not produce a text in the usual shorthand of the day. In fact, the resulting text was not readable by the scribes who took the dictation. Verse 42 states *et scripserunt quae dicebantur ex successione notis quas non sciebant*: “and by turns they wrote what was dictated, in characters which they did not know.” This would seem to imply that they were using some sort of alternative script or substitutionary alphabet.

And the Most High gave understanding to the five men, and by turns they wrote what was dictated, in characters which they did not know. They sat forty days, and wrote during the daytime, and ate their bread at night. As for me, I spoke in the daytime and was not silent at night. So during the forty days ninety-four books were written. And when the forty days were ended, the Most High spoke to me, saying, “Make public the twenty-four books that you wrote first and let the worthy and the unworthy read them; but keep the seventy that were written last, in order to give them to the wise among your people.” (4 Ezra 14:42–46)

In v. 26, it appears that only Ezra, who was both a scribe and a priest, was able to decipher the tablets, which suggests a certain esoteric or cryptic character to the script. He was commanded: “Some things you shall make public” (twenty-four books, presumably in legible square script), “and some you shall deliver in secret to the wise” (seventy books of an esoteric or cryptic nature). Was the literature saved for the wise also written in the normal square script or in a cryptic, esoteric, or hieratic script which was readable only by certain privileged classes?

To investigate this query, we will review parallel material from the caves of Qumran, Mt. Zion in Jerusalem, and accounts of esoteric writing from surrounding cultures. In addition, we will seek to determine the nature of this encryption within the broader context of the ancient Mediterranean and Near East. How does the application of encryption to sacred or revelatory texts in religious contexts differ from that which is utilized in secular contexts? How can the finding of papyrus documents written in cryptic or hieratic scripts at Qumran help us to understand better the details of 4 Ezra 14 and vice versa? It is hoped that in the space of this article we might be able to answer some of these questions, at least in part.

In 1952, the surprising discovery at Qumran’s Cave 4 of documents written in cryptic or esoteric scripts first exposed the world to the use of esoteric scripts during the Second Temple period. At that time these fragmentary manuscripts, written in three script forms, were initially counted as seven or eight manuscripts *en toto*, and were understood to have been used by a single group, the Essenes. Over the course of the
forty years following their discovery, little progress was made on their
decipherment and reconstruction, aside from two texts: 4Q298 Words of
the Sage to all Sons of Dawn, and one fragment from 4Q317 Luni-Solar
Calendar (olim Phases of the Moon). 
Beginning in the 1990s a scientific
examination of the approximately 450 parchment and papyrus fragments
was made, in particular scrutinizing papyrus fibers, hair follicle patterns,
ink, scribal hands, and surface residue. The result was the recognition
that the fragments comprise between 70 and 100 manuscripts (seven to
ten percent of all manuscripts identified from the Qumran caves). While
the scribal techniques, literary forms, and calendars pointed to a priestly
 scribal practice and audience, the diversity among the texts has led
scholars to suggest that the use of these esoteric scripts was not confined
to a single priestly group. 

The 2009 discovery of a stone cup during Jerusalem’s Zion Gate
excavations has confirmed that esoteric scripts, including the so-called
“Cryptic A” script, were utilized in a wider geographical range and in a
greater variety of contexts during the late Second Temple period than
first supposed.

4. Józef T. Milik, ed. and trans., The Books of Enoch: Aramaic Fragments of
Qumran Cave 4 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), 62. The text of 4Q298 Words of
the Sage to all Sons of Dawn was reconstituted by Martin Abegg from excerpts of
Milik’s transcriptions found in the original editorial team’s preliminary card
 concordance and published (without the author’s permission). Ben Zion Wacholder
and Martin G. Abegg, A Preliminary Edition of the Unpublished Dead Sea Scrolls:
The Hebrew and Aramaic Texts from Cave Four (Washington, D.C.: Biblical

5. Stephen Pfann and Menahem Kister, “4QcryptA Words of the Maskil to All
et al.; DJD XX; Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 2–6; and “Cryptic Texts: 249a-z, 250a-j
and 313–313b,” in Cryptic Texts and Miscellanea, Part 1 (ed. Stephen J. Pfann,


7. See Stephen Pfann, “The Mount Zion Inscribed Cup: Preliminary Observa-
tions,” in New Studies in the Archaeology of Jerusalem and Its Region: Collected
Papers (ed. D. Amit, O. Peleg-Barkat, and G. D. Stiebel; Jerusalem: Israel Antiqui-
ties Authority and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem Institute of Archaeology,
2010), *44–*53.
Figure 3. The Development of the Extant Hebrew Hieratic (a.k.a. Cryptic A) Scripts (Drawing by Stephen Pfann).
These discoveries raise questions as to how and why these scripts were used. In order to delineate the reasons for the use of esoteric scripts within the context of Second Temple Judaism, we must first examine the use of cryptography in antiquity in general.

**Egyptian Hieratic Script**

The clearest evidence for a script that was adapted and used exclusively by a priestly class is to be found in Egyptian hieratic script, which spans a period in Egyptian history from the Old Kingdom through the Ptolemaic Period (ca. 3000–30 B.C.E.) and is written mainly on papyrus with ink.8

The question as to whether Egyptian hieratic script may be defined as cryptographic writing in a technical sense lies in whether non-members of the esoteric group (i.e., priests and their associates) could read the writings. Since the hieroglyphs from which the script is derived are readily recognizable in the symbols, it might be a more pertinent question to ask whether non-members could read either hieroglyphs or hieratic script, or for that matter, could read at all. Literacy, at least in the case of the Egyptian language, might have been tolerated only among certain classes of Egyptians, including priests, scribes, and royalty. Up

until the 700 B.C.E. the script was utilized for not only religious purposes but also for records, contracts, and letters. However, this exclusion from literacy would not last forever. By the Late Period and the Ptolemaic Period (700–30 B.C.E.) a cursive form of the script, called demotic (i.e., “popular”) script, evolved from the formal hieratic script and was primarily used for writing legal and administrative documents. During the Roman Period the hieratic script was used solely for writing religious texts while demotic script continued in use in the secular sphere. 9

Books Written in Esoteric Scripts in the Cult of Isis, in North Africa

In a Latin novel written by Apuleius called *Metamorphoses* the protagonist of the novel, Lucius, is obsessed with the pursuit of the arts of magic and at the end of the story believes that he has been called by the goddess Isis to find his place and fulfillment by becoming a member of her cult. The story climaxes with his acceptance and induction by the high priest at the temple. The high priest of the cult of Isis said to Lucius:

“O’ inquit ‘Luci, te felicem, te beatum, quem propitia voluntate numen augustum tantoperedignatur: et quid’ inquit ‘Iam nunc stas otiosus teque ipsum demoraris? Adest tibi dies votisassiduis exoptatus, quo deae multinominis divinis imperis per istas manus meis manus piissimissacrorum arcanis insinueris’: et iniecta dextera senex comissimus ducit me protinus ad ipsas foresaedis amplissimae, rituque sollemni apertionis celebrato ministerio ac matutino peractosacri...” (Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* XI.22)

“Fortunate Lucius,” he [the high priest] exclaimed, “Happy man, to be so greatly honoured by the august goddess’s grace and favour! But come,” he added, “why do you stand there idle, yourself your own delay? The day is here that you have longed and prayed for so incessantly, the day on which by the divine command of the goddess of many names you are to be inducted by these hands of mine into the most holy mysteries of our faith.” And holding my arm affectionately the old man then and there took me out to the doors of the great temple, and after the solemn ritual of opening them and the performance of the morning sacrifice he brought out from the holy of holies some books written in unknown characters. Some of these represented various animals and were shorthand for formulaic expressions, and some were in the form of knots or rounded like a wheel or twisted at

the ends like vine-tendrils, to guard their meaning from the curiosity of the uninitiated. From these he read out to me what I needed to procure for my initiation.\footnote{10}

In this story the initiate, Lucius Apuleius, was able to describe the form of the script, apparently a form of hieratic script mixed with hieroglyphs, used in the text read to him by the high priest, though it was indecipherable to him. The text’s content spelled out the requirements that the candidate should fulfill to become a member of this mystery cult.\footnote{11}

**Delphic Secret Writings**

It is generally understood that the priestly writings of Delphi described by Plutarch were in some way non-standard or cryptographic: “sundry very ancient writings were kept in secret writings by the priests.”\footnote{12} Since the script was solely for the use of the priests, it might justifiably be termed Delphic hieratic script.

**Cryptic A as a Hebrew Hieratic Script**

Like the Paleo-Hebrew script of the second century, the Cryptic A script is the descendent of a script that was guarded and maintained through a long line of tradition deriving from Israel’s monarchical period.\footnote{13} It was passed on through the exile and into the Second Temple period by a class of scribes who used the script for special purposes.\footnote{14} By the late Second


\footnote{11. In certain ways this is not unlike Qumran’s 4Q298 entitled on the scroll itself: “Words of the Sage which he speaks to all Sons of Dawn.” In this case, the title was provided in standard Jewish Aramaic script but the rest of the text is written in the Cryptic A script. The text is an exhortation by the priestly Maskil to novices to follow a certain prescribed way of life. See below.}


\footnote{13. The retention in Cryptic A script of numerous archaic elements from the First Temple period (ca. 1000–586 B.C.E.), as well as numerous traits that are usually associated with evolved scripts, lean strongly in favor of establishing Cryptic A as an ancient script that evolved over many centuries.}

Temple period at Qumran, it would seem that the Paleo-Hebrew script, which had earlier been used for normal writing including monumental inscriptions, seals, and ostraca, was relegated to the writing of certain sacred texts (the Pentateuch and Job), the names of God, or, in certain cases, for nationalistic purposes (e.g., on coins). However, Paleo-Hebrew, as far as can be ascertained, was not used as a cryptic or esoteric script. Although it was maintained by a class of scribes or even priests (cf. the “I am Abba, the priest” Paleo-Hebrew inscription), it was not used as a means of keeping outsiders from reading the text (as is illustrated by the fact that the script was used on various issues of coins and seals from the Persian Period through the second century C.E.).

Unlike the Paleo-Hebrew script, there is no evidence that the Cryptic A script was ever for general use, but rather, as far as our present sampling allows us to see, it was used by a limited group for writing certain religious documents for internal purposes only. If the script was exclusively used and perpetuated by a priesthood and its scribes, then it would seem that it should be classified as a priestly or, more precisely, a “hieratic” script. The fact that the aforementioned priesthood was ethnically “Hebrew” and, moreover, that the script has survived solely in the Hebrew language, would further demarcate the script as a Hebrew hieratic script.15

By the early second century B.C.E., before the advent of the Teacher of Righteousness, and well before Qumran was settled, the script was used by at least one group. Based upon an analysis of the character and content of the literature, such a group (or groups) consisted at least in part of priests, whose final decisions, written or not, were left in the hands of a ruling priesthood.16 It is very likely that this scribal class was responsible for writing in the Hebrew hieratic script and for transmitting the practice to succeeding generations of priestly scribes.

Hieratic scribal traditions, similar to lapidary traditions used for inscribing monuments, tend to display long periods of conservatism, causing the progressive evolution of the various signs or letterforms to unbroken line of transmission for the Paleo-Hebrew script in both Judaea and Samaria.

15. Since it was the Zadokite priesthood who ultimately controlled the group’s organization and teachings, “Zadokite Script” might be more a more fitting name for the script than “Cryptic A.” However, there is no way to ascertain that the use of the script was limited to this narrow sector of either the Essene or Hebrew (Israelite or Judahite) priestly caste.

16. The presence of a scribe, as well as a priest knowledgeable in the central literature, was required wherever ten or more members were assembled (CD 13.2).
lag far behind the standard formal and cursive traditions. This helps to explain the persistence of various archaic elements still resident in the Hebrew hieratic (Cryptic A) tradition, especially with respect to the forms of the letters bet, waw, zayin, tsade, and taw. However, since the tradition did not continue to emulate static letter forms used in current monumental inscriptions, as was the case for Egyptian hieratic,17 most forms evolved in very much the same way as other scripts—subject to the normal developments due to writing in pen and ink.

Cryptography: Its Purpose18

The psychological and sociological basis for cryptography is set out by David Kahn:19

Cryptography is protection. It is to that extension of modern man—communications—what the carapace is to the turtle, ink to the squid, camouflage to the chameleon… The objective is self-preservation. This is the first law of life, as imperative for the body politic as for an individual organism. And if biological evolution demonstrates anything, it is that intelligence best secures that goal. Knowledge is power. In an atmosphere of competition, it may exist in two modes: mine and mine enemy’s. All organisms attempt to maximize the former and minimize the latter. Cryptography and cryptanalysis exemplify the two modes. Cryptography seeks to conserve in exclusivity a nation’s store of knowledge, cryptanalysis to increase that store.

Specific Purposes of Cryptography

The following purposes for cryptography may be elucidated:

1. To hide privileged information (as with political cryptology),20 to hide internal or community writings from non-members, or to protect esoteric knowledge (as with magical cryptology).21

17. As in the case of Egyptian Hieratic script, “In the New Kingdom, from the reign of Thutmose III, the forms of hieratic signs were systematically revised. This revision was marked by a return toward the hieroglyphs which underlay hieratic signs” (Parkinson and Quirke, Papyrus, 27). This may also be a reason for the slow development of the so-called “Paleo-Hebrew” script whose counterparts in the current lapidary tradition can be found on various monumental inscriptions in Samaria and on coins and seals of both Judaea and Samaria from the Persian through the Roman Periods.

18. The following description of cryptography is largely drawn from the author’s Ph.D. dissertation.

2. To create an appearance of specialness or to convey that the text has some added esoteric meaning. In certain cases, the encipherment is too limited to conceal the meaning of the plaintext. In the case of the hieroglyphic inscriptions of Khnumhotep II, only certain hieroglyphs were modified, seeming to add a certain aura to the text.

3. To create a diversion or game, a challenge/test of intelligence (as seen, for example, in the use of texts and ciphers by medieval royalty and monks). Historically, there does not seem to be any singular connection between the method of encipherment and its specific purpose. Of course, certain methods were more effective than others when it came to concealing a message, but as long as the intended purpose was to conceal a message, any proven method would do. The transposition or substitution of letters has been the most widely employed forms of encipherment; these methods were used for all known purposes of encipherment.

Means of Encipherment

Several methods of encipherment were employed among the manuscripts from Qumran. Each method has also been used in other languages and cultures for enciphering texts.

Transposition or Substitution of Letters

Certain types of encipherment involved using the graphic alphabet and language of the original text (also known as the “plaintext”). The method of encipherment may include the transposition of letters or the substitution of letters.

Transposition of letters. This method entails changing the order of letters in individual words or complete lines of text. This change of order can affect all letters of the alphabet or only certain letters. The change of order can be reflected in the movement of letters one or more spaces to

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20. Ibid., 106. The Leiden magical papyrus enciphers only certain elements in its magical formulae and recipes, in order to prevent them from being fully replicated by non-members.
21. Ibid., 91.
24. Kahn’s remains the preeminent work on this subject.
the right or to the left. A retrograde text is one in which the direction of the letters found in the original plaintext has been uniformly reversed. The only example in Qumran literature of this broad category of encipherment is 4Q186 Horoscope, which employed retrograde writing of the entire text:

4Q186 Horoscope 1 ii 6

Substitution of letters. This method involves shifting various or all letters from one position in the plaintext’s alphabet to another. This results in a “cipher alphabet” which, when placed alongside the plaintext alphabet, enables the recipient of an enciphered text to decipher it.

One of the earliest forms of this method is the “atbash” (אַתבָּשׁ) substitution, named after the decipherment of the first two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. This method of encipherment is attested as early as the Judean monarchy, in the book of Jeremiah. It is performed by writing the two halves of the Hebrew alphabet either side by side or one above the other, with the second half written in reverse order. Each half is used as the cipher alphabet for the other. It is carried out as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(plaintext/cipher alphabet)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>דבש</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>לטס</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus in Jer 25:26 and 51:41 the word שֶׁשַׁךְ (Sheshak) is really to be read בֶּבֶל (Babel), and in Jer 51:1 the words לֶב כַּמְי (lev qamai) are intended to be read חָלָיוֹד (Chaldeans).

A simpler expression of this method involves creating a cipher alphabet by writing the alphabet twice, with the second alphabet written below or beside the first but with a starting point several characters off from the first. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(plaintext alphabet)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEFHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZABC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With the aid of this cipher alphabet the phrase “VENI VIDI VICI” would be written “YHQM YMGM YMFM.” This is one of the most common means of encipherment in the history of cryptology and is often called a “Caesar alphabet.”

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25. Suetonius attributes this form of encipherment to Julius Caesar; The Twelve Caesars: Julius 56, Augustus 88. See Kahn, The Codebreakers, 84.
Graphic Modification or Substitution
Another form of encipherment involves either the modification or the substitution of the actual graphic representations used for certain or all letters of the plaintext’s alphabet.

Graphic Modification. The artificial modifications of the various letterforms of the plaintext alphabet range from minor to major changes. Modifications may include adding, subtracting, or changing the shape of the various strokes of a given letter. The earliest known attestation of encipherment was of this type. 26 This is likely the method behind the creation of the Cryptic C alphabet, in which only certain letters have been modified within a standard Paleo-Hebrew alphabet. 27

Often, there are natural substitutions of certain letters that resemble other phonetically comparable letterforms (or graphemes) within a single alphabet, or between different alphabets (for example, phonetic “S” may be represented by both graphemes S and C). There are other cases, however, where the intent is not simply to use an easily remembered substitute. There are certain letters within the Cryptic A alphabet which seem closer in form to a different letter within related Semitic alphabets. For example resh looks like the Phoenician qof, kaf like the Semitic ‘ayin, pe like the Phoenician zayin. The mem and qof resemble the Greek beta and the he resembles the Greek tau. However, this would represent only partial substitution. If these shifts were indeed intentional then this, along with the fact that an antiquated foreign alphabet has been substituted (see below), would add to the difficult task of a decipherment by an outsider. 28

Rotation of Letters or Words. One simple means to modify a given letter (or indeed an entire alphabet) is to reverse the letter (as in mirror writing) or to rotate the letter. This method does little to actually hide the identity of the letters of the plaintext. For instance, the shin of the

26. In the hieroglyphic inscriptions of Khnumhotep II (1900 B.C.E.) only certain hieroglyphs were modified. See Kahn, The Codebreakers, 71. Likewise the enlargement, reduction, rotation, or inversion of a letter may serve a similar purpose.
28. However, even these occurrences should be considered cautiously as of uncertain rationale and perhaps coincidental since these letters may also have their own independent histories of development.
Cryptic A alphabet is similar in form to the same letter in most other Semitic alphabets except that it is written upside down.29

The rotation of entire lines of text, especially upside down, may serve to convey some hidden meaning in an esoteric text. However, in such a case the basic meaning of the plaintext is not actually obscured. 4Q324d Festal Calendar contains a single line of its text, connoting a feast day, written in this way.

Figure 5. 4Q324d Pentacontad Festal Calendar col. i 9–13. Note the bottom line (line 13) is written upside down.

**Graphic Substitution.** The most effective means to obscure a plaintext is through graphic substitution. This involves the replacement of some or all of the letters of the plaintext’s alphabet with unrelated graphic forms or symbols.

**Monalphabetic substitution.** This involves the substitution of the letters of the plaintext with those from one other known or unknown

29. This might have been an incidental, natural development. However, similar inversions and rotations of letters have been attested in other alphabets, including the ancient Hebrew and especially the Greek alphabets. The Cryptic A alphabet also shows a progressive rotation of other letters chronologically over a period of approximately 150 years which serves no function cryptographically.
alphabet. This is the main method behind the creation of the Cryptic A and Cryptic B alphabets in their entirety and, perhaps, behind the Cryptic C alphabet in part.

**Polyalphabetic substitution.** This involves the substitution of letters with those from more than one other alphabet. This is the method used in one manuscript from Qumran, 4Q186 Horoscope. There the alphabet of the plaintext is in part replaced with corresponding letters from the Paleo-Hebrew, Greek, and Cryptic A alphabets. For example:

- 4Q259 Serekh ha-Yahad, selected words were written in the Cryptic A script, e.g., 4Q259 III 3 (written סכומך תורתך; III 4 (written סכומך תורתך).

4Q186 Horoscope 1 ii 7–8 has the most elaborate example of this practice among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The text incorporates other methods of encryption, reversing the direction of the letters and at the same time utilizing switching alphabets affecting various words in the same lines of text and at times switching alphabets on individual letters within the same word.

"He has six (parts) spirit in the House of Light, and three in the Pit of Darkness."

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30. The first attestation of this form of substitution is recorded in Julius Caesar’s *Gallic Wars* 5.48. There he records, “Then he persuaded one of the Gallic troopers with great rewards to deliver a letter to Cicero. The letter (written in the Latin language) he sent written in Greek characters, lest by intercepting it the enemy might get to know of our designs.” Kahn, *The Codebreakers*, 83.

31. Ibid., 127.


33. Ibid.
Substitution by non-alphabetic encoding. Clusters of letters, words, or entire phrases may be replaced by an incomprehensible code. This code could take the form of a series of numbers, a series of letters (at times abbreviated or transformed into one integrated symbol), or unrelated symbols.

The closest parallel to encoding is found in the various simple or complex cryptic signs found mainly in the columns of various community documents, including especially in the margins of the Community Rule (1QS) and the Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa).34

Is the Cryptic A (Hebrew Hieratic) Script Truly Cryptographic?

Based on the general attributes of cryptographic scripts enumerated above, Cryptic A is potentially cryptographic, but not unqualifiedly or with certainty. In fact, a case can be made that the script evolved more or less naturally from an early Phoenician predecessor in much the same way as did the national scripts of Late Phoenician, Hebrew, and Aramaic. Because of this, our use of the term “cryptic” must remain tentative with the understanding that the process through which the script evolved may not fit any of the normal categories for the artificial building of a script with cryptographic intent.

On the other hand, it does seem that, at least in its use, the Cryptic A script served the same purpose as other scripts which are truly cryptographic: those who were making use of this esoteric script (which was generally unreadable to others) were trying to conceal the contents of their writings from outsiders, or those of lesser status. Knowledge of the script was revealed only to an elite class within certain Jewish religious communities and, even then, only on a need-to-know basis. So regardless of the way this script continued to evolve into various nuanced

34. Stephen Pfann, “The Maskil’s Address to All Sons of Dawn,” JQR 85 (1994): 234f. Several of the more elaborate symbols in 1QS appear at, or immediately before, the beginning of sections which deal with the responsibilities of various subgroups within the community, e.g., 1QS 5.1: “the volunteers” (also at 1QIsa 7.8); 1QS 7.25ff.: “the Council of the Community”; 1QS 9.3: “the priests” (similar to 1QIsa 28.8 and 37.7). The use of such cryptic symbols was also found in relation to another priestly circle on tags from Masada. The symbols on these tags were similar in form, but not identical to, the symbols found at Qumran. Yigael Yadin and Joseph Naveh, Masada I (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society and Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1989), 12–19, nos. 282–380. Also Cryptic A letters are found in the columns of 1QIsa at 7.19 (resh); 8.16 (het); 11.15 (Greek theta or Cryptic B symbol), 27:12 (tsade). ‘Ayin is by far the most common and is attested in the columns of various early community documents.
forms within various Jewish religious communities, it might justifiably continue to be termed “cryptic” or “cryptographic.”

**The Use of Esoteric Scripts by the Essenes and Other Jewish Religious Communities**

The use of esoteric scripts during the Second Temple period in Judea varied in function. Although it is not always possible to ascertain why the script was used in the vast majority of the identifiable fragmentary manuscripts, there are a number which at least intimate why such a script could be used among an elite priestly society.

1. **Early Editions of Seminal Works in a Generally Readable Script Intended for Eventual Dissemination Among a Broader Lay Audience or Even the General Public**

It appears that a significant number of key documents authored by diverse Jewish priestly communities, including the Yahad Essenes, during the first two centuries B.C.E. may have been originally produced in the Cryptic A (Hebrew Hieratic) script. In many cases these key documents were eventually reproduced in the standard Jewish Aramaic script. This is evidently the case concerning both seminal doctrinal compositions and institutional calendars. For example:

**Seminal doctrinal compositions.**

1. Two papyrus copies written in the Cryptic A script of a pre-Essene copy of the Midrash HaTorah, the latest form of which (Midrash HaTorah HaAchronah) was credited in the conclusion of 4QDa and 4QDb to be the authoritative undergirding for the Damascus Document. Both were found in Qumran Cave 4. The best preserved copy comes from the beginning of the second century (or perhaps slightly earlier) and bears the title Midrash Sefer Mosheh on the verso of the first column of the scroll in an archaic form of Jewish Aramaic Script. Still another fragment of a later, third copy of this document (4Q445 frg. 6), or a text which contains a quote from it, was found in the same cave.

written on parchment in the standard Jewish Aramaic Script which is to be dated to the first century B.C.E.

Figure 6. 4Q249 Midrash Sefer Mosheh recto, col. I; inset: verso of col. I with title in Jewish Aramaic Script

2. A pre- or proto-Essene form of the Rule of the Congregation (Serekh HaEdah) was found in up to nine manuscripts written in the Cryptic A script (4Q249a-i cryptA Serekh HaEdah a-i) which appears to have evolved textually over a period of 60–75 years during the second century B.C.E. The latest, most evolved form of this document appears in the standard Jewish Aramaic Script from the end of that century (1QSa Rule of the Congregation) which was combined in one scroll with 1QS Rule of the Community. 36

3. Fragments of a Zadokite/Sadducean treatise Miqsat Ma'asei HaTorah (4QMMT) were found at Qumran written in the Cryptic A script (4Q313 Miqsat Ma'asei ha-Torah), but found in later manuscripts written in the normal Jewish Script (4Q394MMT a, 4Q396MMT c, 4Q397MMT d). 38

37. Ibid., 697–99, pl. xlii.
Seminal institutional calendars.

4. A form of the Enochic Luni-Solar Calendar (4Q317cryptA Luni-Solar Calendar a-e) discovered at Qumran written in the Cryptic A script was incorporated in a more detailed form in other documents in Jewish Aramaic Script. This includes both in the Enochide Astronomical Book of Enoch and the Yahad/Essene Calendars (4Q319, 4Q320, 4Q321 and 4Q321a).39

5. A Pentacontad-Festal Calendar was popular in Zadokite/Sadducean circles. A number of early manuscripts of this calendar survive written in a peculiar form of the Cryptic A script, (4Q324d-f cryptA Lit. Cal. a-e).40 The unique feasts of this calendar also appear in key documents of Zadokite/Sadducean origin including summary lists and descriptions of these feasts in the Temple Scroll (11QTa xlviii, 11QTb) and in the festivals commanded in the book of Jubilees (esp. Jub. 7:36).41 Copies of the same calendar also survive in somewhat later manuscripts, but written in the square Jewish script (4Q394 1–2 CalDoc D), one of which was prefaced to a copy of 4QMMT (cf. 4Q394 3–7 MMT†).42

2. Texts of a Hortatory Nature Intended to Be Read By (High) Priests to Novices Who Were Entering a Religious Sect and Were Not Intended to Be Read By Anyone Outside a Priestly Circle

The Golden Ass.

The High Priest Lucius Apuleius states: “you are to be inducted by these hands of mine into the most holy mysteries of our faith… he brought out from the holy of holies some books written in unknown characters… to guard their meaning from the curiosity of the uninitiated. From these he read out to me what I needed to procure for my initiation.” (Lucius Apuleius, Metamorphoses XI.22)

40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
4Q298: Words of a Maskil to All Sons of Dawn.

Figure 7. 4Q298 Words of a Maskil to all Sons of Dawn, top of cols i and ii

Frgs. 1–2 i

1. [Word]s of a Maskil which he spoke to all Sons of Dawn. Lend your ea[r to me, all men of heart/understanding;

3. Personal Devotional Use of the Script
These texts include temple prayers containing phrases of and/or often repeated lines of letters of divine names, words or sounds that invoke sacred power. For example, from Jerusalem, yet another priestly context, the same esoteric script was used to write letters of the tetragrammaton and the full name “Adonai” on a stone cup found above a ritual immersion pool of the first century C.E.43

4. Esoteric Treatises or Teaching

43. The Zion Gate cup; see n. 7 above. A similar phenomenon may be seen in the Egyptian temple prayers transcribed in hieroglyphic or hieratic characters and magic texts written in Coptic or Greek derived from this practice. This practice is found again on Byzantine Period amulets.
There are also certain texts that were intentionally kept for the eyes of the elite alone, never intended to be read by the eyes of non-members, novices, laity, or religious community members of a lower status. “And when you have finished, some things you shall make public, and some you shall deliver in secret to the wise” (4 Ezra 14:26).

Many texts from Cave 4 written in hieratic scripts might be of this nature, but it is difficult to determine with certainty. There may also be texts that escaped the clutch of the priesthood either in whole or in part by being transcribed into Jewish Aramaic Script.

In the background of the story in 4 Ezra 14 is (1) the belief that the Law revealed to Moses at Sinai had been burned, and (2) the Law was to be restored by a second revelation to Ezra. This revelation given to Ezra, in summary, included “many wondrous things,” “the secrets of the times,” and “the end of the times.” God commanded Ezra, “(Some of) these words you shall publish openly, and (some of) these you shall keep secret” (4 Ezra 14:5–7).44

Ezra, as a second Moses, was to receive the revelation in a second giving of the Law. Ezra pleads that God would reveal his Law again to the present generation and for generations to come:

   For thy law has been burned, and so no one knows the things which have been done or will be done by thee. If then I have found favor before thee, send the Holy Spirit into me, and I will write everything that has happened in the world from the beginning, the things which were written in thy law, that men may be able to find the path, and that those who wish to live in the last days may live. (4 Ezra 14:21–22)

   This definition of “the law” includes Genesis, Exodus, Israel’s sojourn and deliverance from Egypt, receiving the “law of life” at Sinai, the unfaithfulness to the law, the possession of the Land in Zion, Israel’s iniquity and unfaithfulness to God’s ways, their justified loss of and exile from the land until Ezra’s present day, and beyond (4 Ezra 14:27–35). This framework of the “law” extends well beyond the five Books of Moses and likely includes the other books of the Hebrew Bible.45 The twenty-four openly published books for “the worthy and the unworthy” include the prophetic interpretation of both current times and future

44. The Pharisaic and early rabbinc traditions held that part of the revelation that came from Mt. Sinai, limited to the five Books of Moses, would be conveyed from generation to generation in writing. The remainder of the revelation was interpretive and would not be conveyed in writing but orally to sages from generation to generation. The other writings which make up the rest of the books of the Bible were of secondary and tertiary authority.
times (as found in the former and latter prophets of the Bible). Treatment of the current and future times is apparently also a key subject of the seventy secret books disclosed to Ezra but intended exclusively for the “wise among your people” (who also have in them “the spring of understanding, the fountain of wisdom, and the river of knowledge”).

It is not clearly stated that the seventy books copied from the wax tablets (likely onto papyrus, cf. 2 Esdras 15:2) would be protected by encryption. However it does seem likely in light of the fact that such practices are already mentioned earlier in the chapter. (This may be how the author of 4 Ezra accounts for the existence of books “among your people” which had currently survived in some form of cryptic script in his own day or in the centuries before.)

This may also be the case of the more than fifty copies of Midrash Sefer Moshe, Serekh Ha’Edah, and other Cryptic A hieratic texts which were found at Qumran. Many of these texts were intended to exist as an esoteric commentary to be read alongside the Bible itself. It may be that at least initially these documents were not intended to become available to the common person, but they somehow escaped the control of a religious community’s priestly elite.

It is quite possible that some of these texts of Cave 4 may have been perceived by some of Qumran’s community members to have been conveyed either through Moses at Sinai, or through Ezra in a field, or through certain prophets known or unknown. Some of these may also be remnants of the words conveyed from the divine council in nightly meetings among the Yahad. What we do know is that at some time in the late Second Temple period the contents of these scrolls were encrypted in esoteric hieratic scripts in order to limit access to the contents and meaning of the texts to relatively few individuals within a broader religious community.

Whatever the case, the mass of papyrus scroll fragments from Qumran written in Hebrew hieratic (Cryptic A) beg an explanation from the Dead Sea Scrolls scholar as to how and why they were produced combined with other scrolls in that desert place. At the very least 4 Ezra 14 provides a credible historical and social backdrop or model for a tradition behind the origination of scrolls such as these from the caves of Qumran.

From the vantage point of the Roman Period, the author of 4 Ezra reveals that in his tradition or in his recent memory there were scrolls similar in many ways to those at Qumran. If he had an opportunity to see them, we cannot really know whether any of these encrypted texts from

46. There were two enumerations of books of the Bible (24 and 22 books) during the late Second Temple period. Cf. ibid., 441.
Qumran would have actually been understood by him to be part of the seventy scrolls to be read by the wise. It does, however deserve further consideration.

**Papyrus as the Medium for Conveying Sacred Texts**

The vast majority of the 70 to 100 scrolls which were inscribed in the Cryptic A script, about 85%, were written on papyrus. (The inverse is true concerning the other literary scrolls of Qumran written in other scripts where about 90% of those scrolls were written on parchment.) This use of papyrus seems to be in striking contrast to the demands of rabbinic literature where sacred texts, especially the Torah, were to be written on skins of kosher animals only. However, one text exists where the use of papyrus for texts produced after divine revelation was not considered merely an option but commanded as the appropriate medium for the final product. In 2 Esdras 15:1–2 we read: “The Lord says, ‘Behold, speak in the ears of my people the words of the prophecy which I will put in your mouth, and cause them to be written on paper; for they are trustworthy and true.’”

As seen in the above examples, cryptography was widely used and expressed in a variety of ways. Cryptography could be practiced by anyone who had secrets to document and hide.

**Summary**

1. Numerous forms of cryptography were used in both non-religious and religious contexts.
2. Most substitutionary scripts or modified scripts which were used cryptographically in the ancient world were employed by priests or the scribes of the priests (as in the case of 4 Ezra).
3. The so-called Cryptic A Script found inscribed on manuscripts in Qumran and on a stone cup from Jerusalem is better defined as a Hebrew Hieratic Script that was employed by various sectors of the Aaronide Priesthood during the First and Second Temple periods.
4. The vast majority, about 85%, of the 70 to 100 scrolls which were inscribed in the Cryptic A script at Qumran were written on papyrus instead of parchment.
5. In priestly circles the script was used for:
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a. Early editions of not-yet-finalized, seminal works intended eventually to be disseminated among a broader lay or public audience in a generally readable script.
b. Texts of a hortatory nature intended to be read by (high) priests to novices who were entering a religious sect and were not intended to be published or read aloud by anyone outside a priestly circle.
c. Personal devotional use of the script.
d. Esoteric treatises or teaching that were intended to be kept for the eyes of the elite alone. This is apparently the case of the seventy books that were to be available only “to the wise” in 4 Ezra.

In this article, we have been partially engaged in learning what lies behind the production of cryptographic forms of sacred texts associated with certain Jewish religious communities in late antiquity and in 4 Ezra in particular. The intention seems clear. It appears that the primary goal of cryptography in Jewish circles, as in surrounding cultures, was to reserve these texts and their contents for the eyes of an elite few among the priesthood and sages who guarded the knowledge and access to the sacred sphere except for its devotees. They never intended that outsiders either then or now would gain full access to the texts or understand their contents. In many ways they have succeeded in their intention, even until today.