

THE ESSENES AND THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS AT QUMRAN

In 1947 an Arab shepherd boy was throwing stones at the opening of a cave above him near the shore of the Dead Sea. He heard a jar break and climbed up the cliff to investigate. What he discovered has revolutionized the study of the Bible. There, in that cave, stuffed in jars, were scores of papyrus scrolls covering almost every book of the Old Testament.

While other scrolls have been discovered since, in caves all along the Dead Sea, the scrolls at Qumran are by far the most important as far as Christians are concerned because they are the only ones throughout the Dead Sea region that pre-date or are contemporary with Jesus Christ.

They are, in fact, the only original writings of Hebrew scripture known to exist that are as old or older than Jesus and John the Baptist. All the other Dead Sea Scrolls are later works which bear the trademark of the Jewish Rabbinical School at Jamnia.

These were written well after Christianity had converted great numbers of followers throughout Judea, the Roman Empire, Greece and the lands around the Mediterranean Sea.

Unlike the scrolls at Qumran, the later scrolls were written after the Romans had destroyed Herod's temple in Jerusalem and had either killed or taken into Roman slavery millions of Jewish citizens. Because these later Dead Sea Scrolls were all penned after these shattering events had taken place, one cannot be certain that they were not written with an eye to counter and block the events and teachings that were swirling about them at the time.

The scrolls at Qumran, however, because they were written before any of these events occurred, give us an unbiased picture of the original state of Jewish scripture at the time of Jesus Christ.

They show us, for instance, that there was not just one rescension of the Hebrew scripture being used at the time of Christ -- there were dozens; and they show us that the Greek (Septuagint) Old Testament was used extensively in Judea, and without the onus that it later received from the Rabbinical scholars.

It is for these reasons -- and especially because the Qumran scrolls are the oldest known copies of Jewish scripture in existence -- that Qumran and the sect that produced these scrolls are so vital to the study of Judaism and Christianity.

Who wrote them? What kind of people occupied this monastic compound in the harsh, rocky and barren Judean wilderness that overlooked the Dead Sea?

A widely held theory is that Qumran was inhabited by the Hebrew sect called 'the Essenes.' This was an ascetic Jewish religious community that existed in Palestine at the time the occupation of the Qumran site flourished, and which was both contemporary with and predated John the Baptist, Jesus of Nazareth and the Roman destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 A.D.

The Essenes must have been quite important during these times because information concerning them in the ancient literature is more prevalent than for the other two major Jewish sects, the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

First hand reports concerning the Essenes comes to us from the Jewish philosopher of the Egyptian dispersion, [Philo of Alexandria](#), who lived between 30 B.C. and 40 A.D.

Philo's writings about the Essenes comes down to us through two works, 'Quod omnis probus Fiber sit' and 'Apologia pro Judais.' The second work has been lost but the information was retained in Eusebius' 'Praeparatio Evangelica.'

Another writer contemporary with the Essenes was [Flavius Josephus](#), the famous Jewish historian and priest-general at the time of the Jewish war. His most elaborate description of this group is contained in 'The Jewish War', followed by an interesting, but far less detailed account in 'Jewish Antiquities.'

Josephus wrote his first work sometime between 70 and 75 A.D., and the second somewhat later, but before 100 A.D., the year of his death.

Another first-hand report concerning the Essenes comes from the Roman writer, [Pliny the Elder](#), who died in 79 A.D. Pliny incorporated information about the sect in his work entitled 'Natural History.'

A Greek orator and philosopher, Dio Chrysostom, also mentioned in passing the existence of an Essene community near the Dead Sea. His report is dated somewhat later than Pliny. [\(1.\)](#)

Writing two centuries later, Hippolytus of Rome detailed a long account of the Essenes that, for the most part, is said to have paralleled Josephus' information, but in a few instances provided unique material, though he was not an eyewitness of this sect.

The first reference to the Essenes comes from Josephus, writing about the death of Antigonus in 103 B.C. Josephus relates that the Essenes had an uncanny ability to successfully predict future events, and that the death of Antigonus at the hands of his brother, Aristobulus, ruler of Judea, had been accurately forecast by an Essene named Judas. (2.)

Josephus states that 'Judas was an Essene born and bred, indicating that he had been born into the movement at least a few decades earlier. (3.)

On this occasion, according to Josephus, Judas was sitting in or near the Jerusalem temple with a number of his pupils, showing that he was an Essene teacher of the Law and that he was able to speak his views apparently quite freely in Jerusalem at the end of the second century B.C.

During the 30 years that followed this event, another Jewish party that struggled in Jerusalem against Alexander Jannaeus, grew into great power with the ascendancy of his widow, Alexandra in 76 B.C. This, of course was the Pharisees, whom Josephus indicates at that time was 'a Jewish sect that appeared more pious than the rest and stricter in the interpretation of the Law.' (4.)

The information that Josephus provides concerning his perception of the Essenes -- at least his perception of this movement at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in the great war circa 70 A.D. -- is undoubtedly reinforced by personal contact with members of this order.

It would be difficult to assume that Josephus did not actually observe Essene behavior, talk to Essenes, and discuss with them and others the philosophical finepoints of their beliefs. Especially growing up as he did in an area where they abounded and where they obviously would have been a topic of speculation and controversy -- particularly in such a theocratic society.

As an observer, Josephus is not without scholarly admirers. According to Benjamine Mazar of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and one of the foremost archeologists involved in excavations in Jerusalem, *'The progress of archeological investigation highlights more than ever the great importance of Josephus as a primary source for the study of the topography and history of Jerusalem in Herodian times. All his observations we were able to confirm on repeated occasions through our archeological investigations.'* (5.)

Both Josephus and Philo were impressed with the Essenes. Philo called them 'athletes of virtue,' (6.) and Josephus saw them as saintly.' (7.)

There is, recorded in both Josephus and in the Talmud, the story of one Onias the Righteous, a man who was stoned to death in about 65 B.C. who was particularly saintly and who is believed to have been able to bring rain through his prayers. He is, according to Millar Burrows, thought to have been an Essene. [\(8.\)](#)

There can be little doubt that Essenes were perceived by many in Palestine at the time of the war to be symbols of righteous behaviour: an ethical adaptation of Judaism in a land wracked by civil war, opportunism, banditry and external oppression.

The Essenes thrived in a country and at a time that saw the laws of Moses adapted to fit a wide range of philosophies. Jewish, Persian, Iranian and Hellenistic thoughts apparently competed with one another in a quagmire of Messianic fervor, banditry and zealous terrorism.

Internecine strife and external oppression brought violence almost everywhere throughout the country. The ruling orthodoxy was losing control and there was a fierce promotion of new rules by competing schools of thought. Only the Torah and the Temple itself could be considered universally sacred in this period. Beyond these, intense and often violent philosophic disagreement flourished.

The Sadducees were divided by competing families who fought bitterly with each other for power. With the flow of Roman governors into Judea, the changing fortunes in the aristocratic priestly party were frequent and hostile.

During this period the common people were terribly mistreated and alienated more than ever from the insensitive and competitive aristocracy that ruled them. The Pharisees, according to Josephus, the popular party among the Jewish people, [\(9\)](#) were said to have had seven subdivisions. [\(10.\)](#)

According to Burrows, L. Ginzberg was able to prove that there were both conservative and liberal wings in Pharisaism, [\(11\)](#) and Marcus has argued that the Essenes formed a third (left wing) Pharisaic sect, just a shade less liberal than the Zealots. [\(12\)](#)

During this time there is information regarding the existence of numerous groups in Palestine: The Qumran 'Covenanters,' [\(13\)](#) Zealots, the followers of Judas the Galilean and Saddoch the Pharisee, Sicarii, Bandits, Self-proclaimed Messiah's, Magharians, or cave dwellers, [\(14\)](#) the Baptists, Genistae, Meristae, Hellenists and Nasaraioi. [\(15\)](#)

Almost nothing is known about some of these groups; others were quite prominent. The Galileans who rallied to Judas and Saddoch were termed 'a sect of their own' in Jewish politics by Josephus. [\(16\)](#)

It is not within the scope of this paper to investigate the interrelationships between all these parties and sects, but they are mentioned to show that the situation in Palestine during the

time of the Essenes was immensely complex and confused.

The Essenes appeared historically in Judea during the Hasmonean dynasty and continued through Herodian times, disappearing abruptly shortly after the great war (circa 70 A.D.).

Further complicating the picture, into this proliferation of Mosaic parties was born Jesus of Nazareth, preceded by John the Baptist and setting forth in Palestine and spreading throughout all the middle east, a potpourri of sects, each with their own adherents and literature. Among these, of course, were the Gnostics and the Judeo-Christian Ebionites.

[\(17\)](#)

It is safe to assume, therefore, that the theocratic politics of Judea leading up to the time of the war, the environmental timeframe of the Essenes, was by no means simplistic. In fact, the Essenes themselves were divided. Josephus indicates that there was a sect of Essenes different from the other, which tolerated a kind of marriage between men and women.

[\(18.\)](#)

Where the Essenes came from is not known. It is most probable that they descended from the Hasidim of pre-Hasmonean times who aligned with Judas Maccabee against Antiochus Epiphanies IV about 170 B.C.

A rather remote possibility is that they might be a part of the priesthood, having broken away from the Sadducees. Josephus indicates that the Essenes 'live in no way different from, but as much as possible like those [Sadducees] who are called 'The Many'. [\(19.\)](#)

Their teaching freed them from offering sacrifices in the Temple, but they sacrificed among themselves. [\(20\)](#) Thus their relationship with the Jerusalem Temple is not at all clear.

The meaning of the name 'Essene' is another mystery. We have, coming down to us no Hebrew word for these people, only the Greek. Dupont-Sommers suggests that the word 'Essene' may come from Hebrew words 'Essenoi' or 'Essaioi', with his interpretation being the expression 'Men of Council.' [\(21.\)](#)

Through the development of this possible etymology, Dupont-Sommer was able to establish additional correlation for his theory tying the Essenes to the community at Qumran. Until a Hebrew document surfaces which specifically names this group, the mystery will continue.

Philo suggests that they 'merited the title 'Essenes' because of their holiness', [\(22\)](#) implying that the name may be related in some way to 'saintliness'. In this regard, Dupont-Sommers suggests that 'Philo seems here to play on the similarity between the Greek words 'Essaioi', (Essaeans), and 'Osioi', 'holy' or 'pure'. [\(23.\)](#)

The philosophy and ideology of the Essenes as described in the contemporary literature of their time is presented below.

Philo's first account of the Essenes: [\(24.\)](#)

[\(Return to top of document\)](#)

"They do not offer animal sacrifice, judging it more fitting to render their minds truly holy. They flee the cities and live in villages where clean air and clean social life abound. They either work in the fields or in crafts that contribute to peace. They do not hoard silver and gold and do not acquire great landholdings; procuring for themselves only what is necessary for life. Thus they live without goods and without property, not by misfortune, but out of preference. They do not make armaments of any kind. They do not keep slaves and detest slavery. They avoid wholesale and retail commerce, believing that such activity excites one to cupidity. With respect to philosophy, they dismiss logic but have an extremely high regard for virtue. They honor the Sabbath with great respect over the other days of the week. They have an internal rule which all learn, together with rules on piety, holiness, justice and the knowledge of good and bad. These they make use of in the form of triple definitions, rules regarding the love of God, the love of virtue, and the love of men. They believe God causes all good but cannot be the cause of any evil. They honor virtue by foregoing all riches, glory and pleasure. Further, they are convinced they must be modest, quiet, obedient to the rule, simple, frugal and without mirth. Their life style is communal. They have a common purse. Their salaries they deposit before them all, in the midst of them, to be put to the common employment of those who wish to make use of it. They do not neglect the sick on the pretext that they can produce nothing. With the common purse there is plenty from which to treat all illnesses. They lavish great respect on the elderly. With them they are very generous and surround them with a thousand attentions. They practice virtue like a gymnastic exercise, seeing the accomplishment of praiseworthy deeds as the means by which a man ensures absolute freedom for himself."

Philo's second account of the Essenes: [\(25.\)](#)

"The Essenes live in a number of towns in Judea, and also in many villages and in large groups. They do not enlist by race, but by volunteers who have a zeal for righteousness and an ardent love of men. For this reason there are no young children among the Essenes. Not even adolescents or young men. Instead they are men of old or ripe years who have learned how to control their bodily passions. They possess nothing of their own, not house, field,

slave nor flocks, nor anything which feeds and procures wealth. They live together in brotherhoods, and eat in common together. Everything they do is for the common good of the group. They work at many different jobs and attack their work with amazing zeal and dedication, working from before sunrise to almost sunset without complaint, but in obvious exhilaration. Their exercise is their work. Indeed, they believe their own training to be more agreeable to body and soul, and more lasting, than athletic games, since their exercises remain fitted to their age, even when the body no longer possesses its full strength. They are farmers and shepherds and beekeepers and craftsmen in diverse trades. They share the same way of life, the same table, even the same tastes; all of them loving frugality and hating luxury as a plague for both body and soul. Not only do they share a common table, but common clothes as well. What belongs to one belongs to all. Available to all of them are thick coats for winter and inexpensive light tunics for summer. Seeing it as an obstacle to communal life, they have banned marriage. They view women as selfish, excessively jealous, skillful in seduction and armed, like actors with all sorts of masks designed to flatter and ensnare men, bewitching and capturing their attention and finally leading them astray. They believe that where children are involved, women become audacious, arrogant, swollen with pride, shamelessly violent and employ attitudes dangerous to the good of the common life. The husband, bound by his wife's spells, or anxious for his children from natural necessity, is no more the same to the others, but becomes a different man; instead of a freeman, he becomes a slave."

Flavius Josephus' first account of the Essene philosophy: [\(26.\)](#)

[\(Return to top of document\)](#)

"The Essenes are Jews by race, but are more closely united among themselves by mutual affection, and by their efforts to cultivate a particularly saintly life. They renounce pleasure as an evil, and regard continence and resistance to passions as a virtue. They disdain marriage for themselves, being content to adopt the children of others at a tender age in order to instruct them. They do not abolish marriage, but are convinced women are all licentious and incapable of fidelity to one man. They despise riches. When they enter the sect, they must surrender all of their money and possessions into the common fund, to be put at the disposal of everyone; one single property for the whole group. Therefore neither the humiliation of poverty nor the pride of possession is to be seen anywhere among them. They regard oil as a defilement, and should any of them be involuntarily anointed, he wipes his body clean. They make a point of having their skin

dry and of always being clothed in white garments. In their various communal offices, the administrators are elected and appointed without distinction offices. They are not just in one town only, but in every town several of them form a colony. They welcome members from out of town as coequal brothers, and even though perfect strangers, as though they were intimate friends. For this reason they carry nothing with them when they travel: they are, however, armed against brigands. They do not change their garments or shoes until they have completely worn out. They neither buy nor sell anything among themselves. They give to each other freely and feel no need to repay anything in exchange. Before sunrise they recite certain ancestral prayers to the sun as though entreating it to rise. They work until about 11 A.M. when they put on ritual loincloths and bathe for purification. Then they enter a communal hall, where no one else is allowed, and eat only one bowlful of food for each man, together with their loaves of bread. They eat in silence. Afterwards they lay aside their sacred garment and go back to work until the evening. At evening they partake dinner in the same manner. During meals they are sober and quiet and their silence seems a great mystery to people outside. Their food and drink are so measured out that they are satisfied but no more. They see bodily pleasure as sinful. On the whole they do nothing unless ordered by their superiors, but two things they are allowed to do on their own discretion: to help those 'worthy of help', and to offer food to the needy. They are not allowed, however, to help members of their own families without permission from superiors. They are very careful not to exhibit their anger, carefully controlling such outbursts. They are very loyal and are peacemakers. They refuse to swear oaths, believing every word they speak to be stronger than an oath. They are scrupulous students of the ancient literature. They are ardent students in the healing of diseases, of the roots offering protection, and of the properties of stones. Those desiring to enter the sect are not allowed immediate entrance. They are made to wait outside for a period of one year. During this time each postulant is given a hatchet, a loincloth and a white garment. The hatchet is used for cleanliness in stooling for digging and covering up the hole. Having proved his continence during the first year he draws closer to the way of life and participates in the purificatory baths at a higher degree, but he is not yet admitted into intimacy. His character is tested another two years and if 'ne proves worthy he is received into the company permanently.

They are sworn to love truth and to pursue liars. They must never steal. They are not allowed to keep any secrets from other members of the sect; but they are warned to reveal nothing to outsiders, even under the pain of death. They are not allowed to alter the 'books of the sect, and must keep all the information secret, especially the names of the angels. The name of the Lawgiver, after God, is a matter of great veneration to them; if anyone

blasphemed the name of the Lawgiver he was sentenced to death. Those members convicted of grave faults are expelled from the order. In matters of judgement Essene leaders are very exact and impartial. Their decisions are irrevocable. They are so scrupulous in matters pertaining to the Sabbath day that they refuse even to go to stool on that day, They always give way to the opinion of the majority, and they make it their duty to obey their elders. They are divided into four lots according to the duration of thier discipline, and the juniors are so inferior to their elders that if the latter touch them, they wash themselves as though they had been in contact with a stranger. They despise danger: they triumph over pain by the heroism of their convictions, and consider death, if it comes with glory, to be better than the preservation of life. They died in great glory amidst terrible torture in the war against the Romans. They believe that their souls are immortal, but that their bodies are corruptible. They believe the soul is trapped in the body and is freed with death. They believe that there is a place 'across the ocean' where just souls gather, a place reserved for the immortal souls of the just. The souls of the wicked, however, are relegated to a dark pit, shaken by storms and full of unending chastisement. Some of the Essenes became expert in forecasting the future."

Josephus' second account of the Essenes: [\(27.\)](#)

"The Essenes declare that souls are immortal and consider it necessary to struggle to obtain the reward of righteousness. They send offerings to the Temple, but offer no sacrifices since the purifications to which they are accustomed are different. For this reason, they refrain from entering into the common enclosure, but offer sacrifice among themselves. They are holy men and completely given up to agricultural labor."

Pliny the Elder's account of the Essenes [\(28.\)](#)

[\(Return to top of document\)](#)

"To the west (of the Dead Sea) the Essenes have put the necessary distance between themselves and the insalubrious shore. They are a people unique of its kind and admirable beyond all others in the whole world; without women and renouncing love entirely, without money and having for company only palm trees. Owing to the throng of newcomers, this people is daily reborn in equal number; indeed, those whom, wearied by the fluctuations of fortune, life leads to adopt their customs, stream in in great numbers. Thus, unbelievable though this may seem, for thousands of centuries a people has

existed which is eternal yet into which no one is born: so fruitful for them is the repentance which others feel for their past lives!"

In the accounts of Philo and Josephus above, I have paraphrased many of the quotations, having tried to screen out duplicate material, and leave intact the skeletal framework of the Essene beliefs as related by these authors. As can be seen on a few points they seem to be in some disagreement.

Josephus was born and raised in Judea where the Essenes actually dwelled. Philo, on the other hand lived in Alexandria Egypt. Philo's somewhat more idealized report may reflect his distance, but the close similarities between both reports suggests that much of the material they relate must have been common knowledge.

The fact of the existence of the Essenes and their major beliefs was probably not a great secret among the people of Judea during this time period.

The relationship between the Essenes and the Temple in Jerusalem is not well understood, but they appear to have doted on the ancient writings and on the prophets, '...trained as they are in the study of the holy books and the [sacred] writings, and the sayings of the prophets...' [\(29.\)](#)

'On (the Sabbath) they proceed to the holy places called synagogues, where they sit attentive and well-behaved. One of them then takes up the books and reads, and another from among the more learned steps forward and explains whatever is not easy to understand in these books. Most of the time, and in accordance with an ancient method of inquiry, instruction is given them by means of symbols.' [\(30.\)](#)

Both Josephus and Philo give the number of Essenes in Judea as around 4000 members; a modest size to be sure, but certainly large enough to have been quite visible and compelling, spread out as they were said to have been into every village.

For all practical purposes, the great war silenced most of the dissident Jewish voices and this included, apparently, the Essenes. Through the destruction of the temple, the war brought to a cataclysmic end the aristocratic priesthood, together with either the death or enslavement of almost every Jew who had participated hostilely against the Romans. Josephus specifically mentions the heroic death of the Essenes at the hands of the Romans. [\(31.\)](#)

In his expansive account of the Essenes in 'The Jewish War', Josephus seems to imply a continuing major role for the Essenes in postwar Judea, but the fact that he mentions them

only briefly in a later work may indicate their rapidly declining numbers and importance just a few decades later.

The only wing of Judean politics to survive the great war was a Pharisaic branch built largely under the auspices of Johanan ben Zakkai who obtained permission from Titus, the Roman conqueror of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., to go to Jamnia and there set up a Rabbinical school.

The rabbinical school in Jamnia instrumented sweeping changes in Judean theology and literature, creating what is called 'Rabbinic Judaism', the forerunner of Judaism as it is known today.

All avenues of thought and teaching that proliferated in Judea before the great war were abolished by the Jamnia school in favor of this one Pharisaic interpretation. Only a single Hebrew rescension of the Holy Scriptures survived.

The Sadducean priesthood and the Essenes simply disappeared as if they had never existed. All literature that did not reflect the Jamnia party line was destroyed or abolished. This included the exilic Septuagint version of the scriptures.

The oral tradition was codified in writing and became an essential part of a new document in Jewish literature called the Talmud.

As we have already mentioned, what makes the Qumran documents so important to us is that it consists of pre-Jamnian material. It presents us with a picture of Judaism as it existed at, and before the days of Christ.

From this material and using historical information, scholars have been able to reconstruct a picture of Judea in the messianic age that is far more dimensional than that stemming from the monolithic voice that arose a century later.

The question of whether or not the community of Qumran or the scrolls found in the caves there were products of the Essenes is a topic of debate. The similarities between the two are striking and the weight of scholarship leans heavily to the idea that they are one and the same.

But for most Christians, the scrolls at Qumran are living proof that the scriptures we have today stem from documents that have changed little, if at all, over two thousand years of copying and recopying by numberless unknown scribes.

The 'Isaiah Scroll' which comes from Qumran and is displayed in its entirety at the very center of the [The Israel Museum in Jerusalem](http://www.israelmuseum.org/) is at least 100 years older than Jesus. Its very age absolute proof that Isaiah's words of prophecy ring out a truth that Christians could not possibly have made up, or altered, during the course of their ministry.

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