

THE ESSENES AND THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

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It is often reported as an established fact that the ancient community who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls and who had members living at the now ruined site of Qumran near the Dead Sea, were the pacific and celibate Essenes described by classical writers. In fact, the situation is rather less clear. In a book which I wrote with my long-time colleague, Richard Leigh, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception*, we dedicated an entire chapter (chapter 11) to an investigation of this question and I will summarise our findings as follows:

Three classical writers mention the Essenes: Pliny (23 -79 AD), Philo (c.15 BC- c.45 AD) and Josephus (c.37 AD- c.100 AD).[i] They describe the Essenes as being one of the main sects existing within Judaism around the beginning of the Christian era. Unfortunately, not only are their descriptions inconsistent but the portrait of the Essenes created by these three writers cannot be reconciled with the testimony both of the Dead Sea Scrolls and of the Qumran ruins themselves. The most significant contradictions to note are:

1: Josephus, in *The Jewish Wars*, mentions 'another order' of Essenes who marry but he adds that this is not their typical behaviour; he supports Pliny and Philo in affirming that they were celibate.[ii] Contrary to this assertion are the facts that graves of women and children have been excavated at Qumran and one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the *Community Rule*, gives regulations concerning both marriage and the raising of children.

2: The three classical writers do not give any information which might suggest that the Essenes used a different calendar to the rest of Judaism yet research has revealed that the community who produced the Scrolls, and who are presumed to have inhabited Qumran, used a solar calendar whereas the rest of Judaism used the lunar calendar. If the Qumran community were indeed Essenes then one would reasonably expect such a striking and significant difference to have been noted by the writers.

3: Philo states that the Essenes differed from the Pharisees and Sadducees in that they did not practice ritual animal sacrifice, yet one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the *Temple Scroll*, gives very precise instructions for carrying out precisely this type of sacrifice. Furthermore, excavations at Qumran revealed pots within which animal bones had been carefully placed; the assumption is that these were sacrificial remains.

4: The classical writers speak of Judaism being divided into three major groups, the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes. Yet the term 'Essene' does not appear anywhere in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

5: According to Josephus, the Essenes maintained cordial relations with king Herod the Great who, he states, held the Essenes in high esteem.[iii] The Dead Sea Scrolls however reveal a militant antagonism and unremitting hostility towards non-Judaic authority generally and, according to the *Temple Scroll*, towards the Herodian dynasty specifically.[iv] Furthermore, Qumran seems to have been abandoned around the beginning of the reign of Herod (37 BC) because of his persecution.

6: The classical writers describe the Essenes as being pacifist. Philo specifically mentions that no weapons makers were members of the sect. Josephus draws a distinction between the non-violent Essenes and the violent, militant, and messianic, Zealots. Yet, the ruins of Qumran reveal a defensive tower and a probable forge. In addition, weapons (arrows) were found in the ruins during excavations. The Dead Sea Scrolls themselves, especially the *War Scroll* reveal the sect's belligerent and martial nature.

The Origin of the Name 'Essene'.

The term 'Essene' comes from the Greek *Essenoi* or *Essaioi*, and occurs only in the works of Pliny, Philo and Josephus. If those who wrote the Scrolls were indeed Essenes then one would expect the word to be a translation or transliteration from an Aramaic or Hebrew term of self-definition since the majority of the Dead Sea Scrolls were written those two languages. However, within them there is no immediately obvious derivation for the term. Even the classical writers were in doubt: Philo said that, in his opinion, the name derived from the Greek word *oseeos* meaning 'holy', thus the Essenes were the *Oseeotes*, the 'Holy Ones'.[v]

A modern scholar, Oxford's Dr. Geza Vermes, has argued that the term 'Essene' comes from the Aramaic *assayya*, meaning 'healers'.[vi] While this theory has gained some ground unfortunately the word *assayya* is not found anywhere in the Dead Sea Scrolls, nor is any reference to healing or other medical work.

However, there is a more likely derivation of the term which has been pointed out by Professor Robert Eisenman of California State University, Long Beach. He explained that while the Dead Sea Scroll community had a very individual and distinctive concept of their own role, they did not use one single distinctive name for themselves, rather, they used a variety of self-descriptions. Their overall self-concept was based upon their all-important 'Covenant' - an oath of total obedience to the Law of Moses. Thus, the terms of self-description one finds in the Qumran writings are of the type: 'The Keepers of the Covenant'; 'The Perfect of the Way'; 'The Way of Perfect Righteousness' and innumerable variations on this theme.

Eisenman pointed out that in the Dead Sea Scroll, the *Habakkuk Commentary*, one important appellation of the Scroll community is 'The Doers of the Law' or the *Osei ha-Torah*. [vii] The plural of this is *Osim*, pronounced 'Oseem'. The community at Qumran then would have been the *Osim*, and it is this which constitutes the most likely origin of the Greek term 'Essene'.

It is interesting that a later writer, the Christian Father, Epiphanius, spoke of a Judaic sect which once lived near the Dead Sea and who were called the 'Ossenes'.^[viii] It seems reasonable to consider the Essenes of Pliny, Philo and Josephus, the Ossenes of Epiphanius and the Osim of Qumran as identical. So, in this manner only, the community which produced the Dead Sea Scrolls may be considered as Essenes but not, we should note, as Pliny, Philo or Josephus defined them. It is more useful and less open to misrepresentation, to consider them as messianic Zaddikim ('Righteous Ones').

The Early Christians

Of further interest is that one of the other terms of self-definition used by the Qumran community was 'Keepers of the Covenant', in Hebrew, Nozrei ha-Brit. This is the origin of the term Nozrim, which was one of the first Hebrew names for the group which later became known as 'Christians'.^[ix] Modern Arabic Nasrani, meaning 'Christians', comes from the same source. Also derived from the same source is the term 'Nazorean' or 'Nazarene', the term of self-definition used by the first Christians in the Gospels and the Acts. The later village of Nazareth may derive its name from the presence of Nazarenes.

We end this chapter in The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception with the following:

'It would thus seem that the Qumran community was equivalent to the 'early Church' based in Jerusalem ö the 'Nazoreans' who followed James, 'the Lord's brother'.^[x] Indeed, the 'Habakkuk Commentary' states explicitly that Qumran's ruling body, the 'Council of the Community', was actually located at the time in Jerusalem.^[xi] And in Acts 9:2, the members of the 'early Church' are specifically referred to as 'followers of the Way' ö a phrase identical with Qumran usage.'

FURTHER READING

The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception, by Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh. First published London (Jonathan Cape), 1991. It remains in print in the United Kingdom (Corgi paperback) and the United States (Touchstone Books, Simon & Schuster).

The best complete English edition of the Dead Sea Scrolls is The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated, by Florentino Garc'a Mart'nez, Leiden (E.J. Brill), 1994.

The two books mentioned by Professor Robert Eisenman, Maccabees, Zadokites, Christians and Qumran, Leiden (E.J. Brill) 1983, and James the Just in the Habakkuk Peshier, Leiden (E.J. Brill) 1986, have recently been republished in the same volume entitled The Dead Sea Scrolls and the First Christians, Shaftesbury and Rockport (Element), 1996.

There is much further material in Robert Eisenman's, James, the Brother of Jesus, now published only in the United States by Penguin (USA). For a review of the field by an independent and knowledgeable writer, see Neil Asher Silberman, The Hidden Scrolls, New York (Putnam), 1994.

NOTES

[i] Pliny, Natural History, V, xv; Philo Judaeus, Every Good Man is Free, XII-XIII and Hypothetica, 11; Josephus, Life, The Jewish Wars, II, viii and Antiquities of the Jews, XVIII, i.

[ii] Josephus, The Jewish Wars, II, viii.

[iii] Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, XV, x. On this point, see Eisenman, James the Just in the Habakkuk Peshier, p.79. See also Eisenman, James, the Brother of Jesus, pp.38-43.

[iv] The Temple Scroll, LXVI, 10ff gives a prohibition of marriage to one's niece, a relationship which was typical of the Herodian dynasty. See also Eisenman, James the Just in the Habakkuk Peshier, pp.87-94 and his James, the Brother of Jesus, pp.104-109.

[v] Philo, Every Good Man is Free, XII.

[vi] Vermes, 'The Etymology of 'Essenes', Revue de Qumran, 7, ii (1960), p.439. Vermes seems to consider that a link existed with the Alexandrian Therapeutae described by Philo in On the Contemplative Life, but in this he is undoubtedly in error since the Therapeutae have all the characteristics of a Pythagorean Judaic sect rather than of the Dead Sea Scroll sect.

[vii] Eisenman, Maccabees, Zadokites, Christians and Qumran, p.109. [viii] Epiphanius of Constantia, Adversus octoginta haereses, I, i, Haeres xx.

[ix] Eisenman, James the Just in the Habakkuk Peshier, p.99.

[x] Eisenman, James the Just in the Habakkuk Peshier, pp.vii-x. [xi] The Habakkuk Commentary, XII. This section, a commentary on Habakkuk 2.17, describes the adversary, the 'Wicked Priest', attacking the 'Council of the Community' and the 'simple folk of Judah who observe the Law'. These attacks, according to the commentary, took place in Jerusalem (XII, 7-8).