

# QUMRAN: WHAT WAS THE NATURE OF THE SETTLEMENT?<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

The Dead Sea Scrolls---the fascinating manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible, its commentaries, and sectarian doctrines---were found in the caves near Qumran. The site, overlooking the Dead Sea, had a settlement that has been the focal point of controversy. What was the function(s) of the settlement? Various opinions have been proposed for this question.<sup>2</sup> De Vaux (1973), the excavator of Qumran, thinks that the site was an isolated religious community of the Essenes. A military post, or fortress was suggested by Golb (1994). Crown & Cansdale favor the idea of a commercial entrepot (1994). In this paper, several discussions are presented in order to determine which function(s) the settlement had. First, we attempt to define the Essenes to test the feasibility of Qumran---Essene connection; second, provided that the scrolls came from the settlement, we will review the question of who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls; third, we will discuss the evidence of the archaeological excavation to examine whether that evidence supports any of the three functions.

## 2. Definition of the Essenes---What is the normative Essenes?

It is useful to begin our discussion by establishing what the normative Essenes were since we must define Essene before arguing the possibility of Qumran as an Essene community. The Essenes have been described by ancient writers such as Philo of Alexandria, Pliny the Elder, and Flavius Josephus.<sup>3</sup> Because no other sources are available to establish the normative Essenes---the New Testament is silent about Essenes---we must rely on the descriptions by the three writers to define the characteristics of the Essenes. It should be noted that the scrolls found in the nearby caves cannot

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<sup>1</sup>I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Steven Olson for reviewing this article and suggesting necessary corrections for improvement.

<sup>2</sup>A country villa was suggested by Donceel-Voûte (1994), while a manor house by Hirschfeld (1998). These are discussed by Magness (2002:73-100) and not the scope of this article.

<sup>3</sup>Dupont-Sommer has published a convenient collection of the descriptions by these authors

be used to define the Essenes because by doing so, we are presupposing that the scrolls were written by the Essene. Our argument here must be based on the descriptions by the three writers, not on the scrolls.

According to Philo, among the Essenes were experts in the art of sowing and cultivating plants, shepherds leading every sort of flock, and beekeepers (*Apologia pro Judaeis* 8). The reliability of this assessment is unknown. Although it is possible Philo had visited the Essene communities, it is more likely he had only heard of their reputation. Philo may have reconstituted the description of a community of ideal Jews (Petit 1992:155).

Pliny recorded this about the west side of the Dead Sea: "out of range of the exhalations of the coast...[the Essenes] have only palm-trees for company and that the town of Ein Gedi...lies below the Essenes..., now like the other place (i.e., Jerusalem) a heap of ashes" (*Natural History* 5.17.73). There are two possibilities of meaning of the phrase 'below': (1) the vicinity of Ein Gedi, high above the town, is the place the Essenes lived; (2) Qumran is the Essene community if 'below' means 'south', 'further down', or 'downstream' (Vermes 1977:127).

Although De Vaux (1973) and many scholars such as Callaway (1994) preferred the second option, Crown & Cansdale challenge the notion that the words 'above' and 'below' as used by Pliny are interchangeable with north and south. According to Crow & Cansdale, Pliny never used the word 'below' for the next place in a sequence except when that place was genuinely at an altitude lower than the point described. When 'below' was used Pliny meant at an altitude lower than something else (1994:26). The absence of ruins on some place high above Ein Gedi weakens their argument, but the absence can also be explained by the fact that the remains might have disappeared due to their antiquity.<sup>4</sup>

Golb indicates that the statement of Ein Gedi being a "heap of ashes" could only have been written after Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Romans in the wake of its capture in 70 C.E. (1994:59). Because Roman soldiers occupied Qumran after 70 C.E., the people living at Qumran could not have been the Essenes living above Ein Gedi. Golb's argument will be valid if Pliny's descriptions are reliable.

That reliability is questioned by Stegemann (1992:84-85). He argues that Pliny perhaps obtained his information when he came to Jerusalem in 70 C.E. as a Roman officer. The reality be-

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(1961:21-38).

<sup>4</sup>Lynch explored the Dead Sea in 1847-48. His narrative describes caves above En Gedi and possibility that they may have been inhabited in the past (Lynch 1977:289-294).

hind his information went unchecked. The Romans (Legio X Fretensis) had already destroyed the Jewish settlements in the desert region in 68 C.E. The fate of Ein Gedi was known to Pliny, but Pliny did not realize the destruction of Qumran and the subsequent occupation by a Roman garrison. Pliny was told that the Dead Sea Essenes had settled there for centuries (*Natural History* 5.15.73). Stegemann suggests that this is the usual kind of tourist information, a nice story for Pliny's Latin readers (1992:85). Therefore, two possibilities of the Dead Sea Essene location cannot be resolved.

Attempts to establish what the Essenes were like using the works of Josephus also face difficulties. According to Josephus, the Essenes differ from other Jews in resting from all kinds of work on the Sabbath (*War* 9.147-149). The Sabbath rest was common to the Jews and not peculiar to the Essenes. The statement that many Essenes lived to be older than one hundred (*War* 10.150) suggests that Josephus is subject to Philo's idealism (Callaway 1994:416).

Callaway indicates that Pharisees and Essenes are remarkably similar when the statement by Josephus of the two groups are compared (1994:416). In *War* (2.8.14), the Pharisees are characterized as the most exact interpreters of the laws. Fate is attributed to God. The Essenes in *Antiquities* 13.5.9 are strikingly similar to this.

In *Antiquities* 18.1.18, the Essenes are characterized as politically indifferent. However, a certain John the Essene was in charge of the Jewish troops in Thamnia, Lydda, Joppa, and Emmaus in the First Revolt against the Romans (*War* 2.20.2). This is perhaps because the role of Jewish nationalism tends to be minimized for the Roman audience of Josephus and because the Essenes are presented as a Hellenistic school of philosophical thought (Callaway 1994:416).

With regard to women,<sup>5</sup> Josephus states that the Essenes did not introduce married women (*Antiquities* 18j.1,2,5.21). This statement, according to Stegeman (1992:126), does not mention that the Essenes had no wives, but that their wives were not admitted as full members of their community. Therefore, the wives could not participate in the prayer service, in the common meals, and other activities of full members. All of these were exclusive to men. This sort of segregation of women is merely the tradition from biblical times.

Thus, we are unable to reach definitive characteristics of the Essenes through Philo, Pliny and Josephus, who are the only sources for establishing the normative Essenes without resorting to circular argument: If we could recognize information in the Dead Sea scrolls to be Essenic, we could correlate all materials by the three writers with the data of the Dead Sea texts; and if the scrolls 5

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<sup>5</sup>Ancient writers, e.g., Pliny, *Natural History* 5.15.73, describe celibacy as one of the characteristics of the Essene society.

were Essenic, we could use them for interpretation of the data by the three writers (Schiffman 1992:39-40). Will the question of who wrote the Dead Sea scrolls bring helpful information for our quest?

### 3. Who Wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls?

To answer this question, two opinions are presented by Schiffman (1992) and Vanderkam (1992). Summaries of the two views and my evaluation are as follows. Among the sectarian documents of Qumran, MMT---*Miqsat M'aseh ha-Tora*, "some rulings regarding the Torah" <sup>6</sup>---has been considered to be a foundational document of the Qumran sect. Comparison of the laws in MMT with the Mishnah and the Talmud led Schiffman to conclude that the origins of the Qumran sect are Sadducean (1992:41).

According to Schiffman, MMT shows that either the sect was not Essene, but was Sadducean, or that the Essene movement must be totally redefined as having emerged out of Sadducean beginnings. In MMT, the writer criticizes his opponents and explains his own view, specifying the legal violation in the opponents' views. Schiffman points out that in a number of cases, the laws the author of MMT opposes are the same laws that later rabbinic sources attribute to the Pharisees, and the laws the author of MMT espouses match those of the Sadducees as reflected in later rabbinic texts (1992:42-44).

Vanderkam compares the contents of the scrolls to Essene beliefs described by Josephus and others, and insists that Essene thinking as described by Josephus is identical with the views contained in the Manual of Discipline, e.g., common ownership of property. There are 27 parallels and 6 discrepancies between Josephus and the scrolls regarding the Essenes. To explain the discrepancies, Vanderkam suggests that Josephus is describing a later version of Essene beliefs or a non-Qumran wing of the Essene party (1992:54-57).

In response to Schiffman's view that MMT is a Sadducean document, Vanderkam states that the writer of MMT probably agrees with the Sadducean position, as presented in Mishnah in three of the four disputed cases, but it is not significant. Because both the Sadducees and the Essenes had strong priestly roots, there may well have been many areas in which both agreed with one another. Vanderkam, then, attacks credibility of the record of Sadducean-Pharisaic disputes in the Mishnah: the Mishnah was written around 200 C.E. long after the dissolution of both parties.

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<sup>6</sup>For MMT, refer to Qimron & Strugnell 1994A and 1994B (reprint of MMT portion), and Sussmann 1994.

Vanderkam indicates that Schiffman has ignored the numerous agreements between Josephus' description of the Essenes and the contents of the sectarian documents from Qumran. The *Manual of Discipline* enunciates markedly Essene (non-Sadducean) positions. This fact, Vanderkam contends, makes it most improbable that the Qumran sect emerged from Sadducean origins. Vanderkam, finally, indicates that the Essenes and the Sadducees had similar origins in the priestly class of Judea (1992:58-60).

There must be an element of truth in Schiffman's comparison of MMT and the Mishnah, and his conclusion that the Qumran sect was Sadducean; even Vanderkam admits that in some cases the writer of MMT probably agrees with the Sadducean origin, although he considers this as insignificant.

Schiffman is on the right track when he mentions that the Essene movement must be totally redefined as having emerged out of Sadducean beginnings---both the Essenes and the Sadducees, as Vanderkam indicates, share strong priestly roots. Therefore, Schiffman's statement should be modified as "having emerged out of priestly origins." Both sides agree with this fact.

Perhaps the strongest point in favor of the Essene hypothesis is that the views in the *Manual of Discipline* are identical with the description of Essene life by Josephus. Twenty-seven parallels found between the two seem to Vanderkam to be a decisive factor, but he is generous with 6 discrepancies. He thinks that Josephus may be describing a later version of Essene life or another Qumran wing. This is close to the circular argument described above.

This generosity with Josephus is not provided to the Mishnah, which is a basis of the Sadducean hypothesis. Because the Mishnah was written long after the Sadducees and Pharisees disappeared, Vanderkam casts doubts on the credibility of the record of the Mishnah. This kind of textual criticism can be applied to Josephus, though Vanderkam failed to mention it, perhaps due to the circular argument.

One important question regarding the scrolls is the relationship between the scrolls and the settlement. Instead of presupposing that the scrolls belong to the settlers at Qumran (Martínez, et al 1990:523), the question of who hid the scrolls must be considered. One theory is that the scrolls can be traced back to Qumran where the settlers wrote or copied the manuscripts.<sup>7</sup> Another opinion is that the scrolls originated elsewhere, perhaps Jerusalem, for safekeeping. In this case there are

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<sup>7</sup>The pottery used as container of the scrolls found also at the settlement cannot be used as the evidence of this theory because those who hid the scrolls, after having transported them in original wrappers, might simply have taken advantage of the pottery at Qumran (Crown & Cansdale 1994:74)

two possibilities: (1) some of the scrolls could have been placed in the caves as *genizah*, a repository for timeworn sacred manuscripts (Crown & Cansdale 1994:76); (2) the scrolls were placed in the caves for safekeeping during the Roman siege of Jerusalem (Golb 1985:77).

In short, we cannot determine whether the scrolls were written by Sadducees or Essenes. The weight of evidence supporting the Sadducean hypothesis appears to be equal to that supporting the Essene. Moreover, the question of who hid the scrolls illuminates the fact that the scrolls may have nothing to do with the Qumran settlement. This results in providing no convincing argument as to the nature of the settlement.

#### 4. Archaeological Consideration

Since the ancient writings yield insufficient evidence to decide the function of the Dead Sea settlement, we now turn to archaeological evidence. Unfortunately, no definitive archaeological report of Qumran has been published though excavation of the site began forty years ago. Donceel & Donceel-Voûte, working to publish De Vaux's data, are facing serious defects of available records.<sup>8</sup> Thirty-four out of the total 144 loci were never photographed by the excavators. On the other hand, discoveries of minor interest received dense coverage, e.g., intact jars, for which no photograph of the architectural and archaeological context was recorded (1994:17). Despite these handicaps, I wish to discuss the following: the pottery, locus 30, cave 8 (3Q), and the cemetery.

De Vaux (1973:33) stated that pottery found in the caves was identical with that found at the settlement. The jars were dated to the second half of the first century C.E. De Vaux also found that an installation at Qumran could be identified as a potter's workshop and a storage-space for the pottery. This caused De Vaux to assert that the settlers had used jars to hide the scrolls in the caves. As Golb indicates, De Vaux might have generated a scholarly leap of faith for historical deductions. If pottery of the same or similar styles is found in different locations, that does not bespeak an organic connection between them, but only indicates simultaneous habitation of the sites in that period of time to which the pottery may be dated (1994:66). It is possible that those who hid the scrolls in the caves simply used the pottery of Qumran and that the scrolls are not related to the Qumran settlers.

Recently, Magness (1994) restudied pottery of Qumran and noticed that the great numbers of plain, identical plates, cups, and bowls of Qumran form a contrast with contemporary assemblages

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<sup>8</sup>There are many missing artifacts: 495 out of 691 coins, 20 of 64 lamps, 3 of 16 inventoried glass wares (but total 71 wares somehow re-discovered!) (Donceel & Donceel-Voûte 1994:4-13).

at other Judean sites, which are typologically much richer and more varied. Apparently, undecorated pottery instead of fine wares were manufactured and used by people of Qumran. This led Magness to suggest that the settlers practiced a deliberate and selective policy of isolation---manufacturing pottery to suit their special needs of community in communal nature (1994:47). However, as the geographical location of Qumran implies, while some “luxury” items such as glass wares might be brought in, bringing earthen ware from other sites is simply impractical and the inhabitants produced their own plain pottery for their daily use, which could be religious, defensive, or commercial.

De Vaux considered locus 30 to be *scriptorium*, where the scrolls were supposedly copied. His conclusion was based on inkwells among the finds in this locus and installations (furniture) he interpreted as desks (1973:29-30). However, recent investigation by Donceel & Donceel-Voûte revealed shocking reality: there is no relation between the inkwells and the stuccoed furniture. According to Donceel et al, the inkwells were found “sur le sol”, on the floor. The ceiling had burnt and fallen over the ground floor and its contents, the inkwells amongst others, forming over it a thick level which contained the stuccoed floor and furniture. Hence, it is now probable that locus 30 was a dining room, *triclinia* rather than *scriptorium* (1994:27-31), which is based on insufficient evidence.<sup>9</sup> The identification of locus 30 as a dining room suggests a commercial or military nature rather than a religious.

In cave 8, or 3Q, the two parts of a copper scroll were found one on top of the other, hidden behind a rock away from the remnants of 14 leather manuscripts lying together in another room of this large cave (Baillet, et al 1962:201). Because of this description, Stegemann claims that there is no connection between the 14 “Qumran” manuscripts and the copper scroll and that the same cave was used as a hiding place by different people. To strengthen his opinion, he cites the geographical fact that 3Q is the most distant from Qumran (more than 2km to the north); this supposedly allows anyone to enter and leave the cave without being seen from Qumran (1992:98). However, the very same fact that 3Q is far away from Qumran may indicate that none of the manuscripts in this cave came from the settlement. Stegemann, who advocates Qumran-Essene hypothesis, was probably troubled by the contents of the copper scroll which describe hiding places of secret treasure.

In order to test the idea that the ceiling of 3Q collapsed after the placement of the scrolls,

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<sup>9</sup>It is surprising that no evidence of parchments or scribal tools has been found in locus 30 while manuscript fragments were discovered in the ruins of Masada with similar climate condition as Qumran (Golb 1994:64).

Patrich decided to remove the boulders of the ceiling collapse to determine whether there are more jars underneath. What Patrich found was a grey layer (less than 1cm thick) with some Chalcolithic sherds. No single sherd of the Qumran type was unearthed. The ceiling had already collapsed long before people hid the jars containing the scrolls in the cave. The fact that the jars were simply heaped behind the rocks led Patrich to suggest that the cave---an open recess, not deep and dark but exposed to daylight---was used as a *genizah*. The cave was an unlikely candidate to be a hiding place for precious writings (1994:77).

De Vaux excavated 41 of 1200 graves in the main and secondary cemeteries (1973:128-129). Nine additional graves in the main cemetery were excavated by Steckoll (1968:335) in 1966 and 1967. A total of fifty tombs consisted of thirty-six male, nine female, and six children (one found with its mother).<sup>10</sup> This indicates that over 30 % of the excavated graves contained remains of women and children. De Vaux, realizing that the presence of the women's tombs does not strengthen his Essene-Qumran connection, mentions that one woman's grave in the main cemetery is in a position apart from the general alignment and is a different type from the rest and that six other tombs of women and four of children are situated either in the secondary cemeteries or the extensions to the main cemetery (1973:128-129).

However, the notion of the secondary cemeteries should be seriously reconsidered. As Steckoll (1969:37-44) has shown on a map and aerial photograph, there is only a single cemetery following the natural topography eastward from the Qumran settlement. Topography dictated the shaping of the cemetery into four prongs which were misinterpreted by De Vaux as secondary cemeteries. Because the presence of female graves reduces the probability of De Vaux's idea that celibate Essene had been living in Qumran, he probably attempted to explain this contradicting evidence.<sup>11</sup> This is why the concept of a main and secondary cemeteries was introduced (Kappera 1994:100).

As for ethnicity of the buried people, Golb, believing that Qumran served as a fortress, supposes that the graves were of the Jewish warriors who fought at Qumran. He lists two reasons: (1) the fact that the graves are all on the same horizontal level and in uniform exterior style indicates that they were dug at one time; (2) the fact that the cemetery lies close to the settlement proves that it could not have been an Essene graveyard since any group of pious people in such immediate

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<sup>10</sup>Elder (1994:225-227) published useful tables of the excavated graves at Qumran, though she presupposes that Qumran was an Essene settlement.

<sup>11</sup>This is what Davies calls "how not to do archaeology: preconceptions lead to overinterpretation, which is worse than underinterpretation" (1988:206).



proximity to a cemetery would have violated principles of ritual purity (1994:70).

To answer the first reason of Golb's hypothesis, it should be noted that only a few percent of the tombs have been excavated so far. Thus, we cannot conjecture the short time-span of burials through exterior observation alone. Golb's second reason has been tested by Steckoll, who made the soundings of the burial that could violate ritual purity of the inhabitants. The results show that the rule prohibiting burial at a distance less than 50 cubits from dwelling was not violated (1968:328).

After about forty years since the first excavations of graves, we are left with vague descriptions of the cemetery. As Kappera points out, nobody in fact has counted the tombs, or prepared a scholarly plan. He also reports that the bones have disappeared and cannot be found. It is discouraging that various opinions are based on preliminary information from a small portion of the Qumran burials. We must agree that preliminary publications are insufficient to reach definitive results (1994:99-104) and that additional excavation of the graves is awaited.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, to determine the nature of the Qumran settlement we have examined the definition of the Essenes, the writers of the scrolls, and archaeological evidence. Attempts to establish the normative Essenes are confronted by various difficulties: Philo seems to have used secondary information; Pliny's description about location of the Essenes creates scholarly debates and fails to decide whether the Essenes were settled at Qumran or the vicinity of Ein Gedi; and information provided by Josephus suffers from its contradictory statement. Whether Sadducees or Essenes wrote the scrolls cannot be determined with certainty and it is possible that the scrolls have nothing to do with the Qumran settlement. Consideration of pottery, locus 30, cave 8, and cemetery cannot provide definitive answer to our question; lack of full publication is a major factor in insufficient information and various interpretations. Because the above discussion fails to bring a definitive answer to the nature of the settlement, it would be better to consider that the settlement had multiple functions---religious, commercial, and military---in the light of available evidence rather than presupposing that Qumran had one and only one function in ancient time.

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