

# THE ESSENES, QUMRAN, AND THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

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The importance of the Essenes and their creation of the Dead Sea Scrolls are of interest because the scrolls contain well over eight hundred separate documents recording biblical history and because the amazing inhabitants of Khirbet Qumran created the scrolls before 100 CE.<sup>1</sup> Tomes have been written about the scrolls and their Essene connection, but reported here are only some of the reliably recorded details, together with a record of our own observations, made on site at Qumran in 1965 (Fig 1).



Fig 1. The Caves at Qumran (Photo by the Author).

Recent (1990) hypotheses discount that the Essenes created most of the scrolls. Some conspiracy theories suggest that the Essenes created none of the scrolls. A personal visit to Qumran in 1965 has convinced us that more credit is due the Essenes than is attributed to them by some writers.

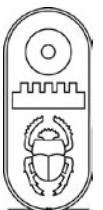
## Who Were the Essenes?

Qumran was inhabited by the Hebrew sect called the Essenes, which was a Jewish religious community that existed in Palestine at the time the site was active. The Essenes were apparently important during those times. Ancient literature regarding the Essenes is more abundant than for the other two major Jewish sects, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Where the Essenes came from is unknown. “It is most probable that they descended from the Hasidim of pre-Hasmonean times, who aligned with Judas Maccabee against Antiochus IV Epiphanes about 170 BCE.”<sup>2</sup>

The meaning of the word *Essene* is a mystery. There is no Hebrew word for these people, only the Greek. Dupont-Sommers suggests that the word *Essene* may come from the Hebrew words *Essenoi* or *Essaioi*,

with his interpretation being the expression “Men of Council.”<sup>3</sup>

Firsthand reports concerning the Essenes are attributed to the Jewish philosopher of the Egyptian Diaspora, Philo of Alexandria, who lived between 20 BCE and 50 CE. Philo remarks that, “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....They possess nothing of their own, not house, field, slave, neither flocks nor anything that feeds and procures wealth....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...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...”<sup>4</sup>

Philo’s account, although remarkable, is probably more accurate than not. The reader should not confuse the cloistered Essenian way of life with the validity of their accomplishments as the Dead Sea Scroll(s)



Fig 2. Scriptorium at Qumran (Photo by the Author).

scribes, confirming the hypothesis formed during our 1965 visit. During this author’s visit to Qumran, a hypothesis was formed that is hopefully well founded, and that will be explored as we continue.

### The Qumran Site

The remains of Khirbet Qumran are near the end of the Wadi Qumran, a dry “stream bed” in the northwest corner of the Dead Sea. Some of the eleven Dead Sea Scroll caves are visible from and within easy walking distance of Qumran. It was a small settlement, with perhaps 100-200 Essenian inhabitants.<sup>5</sup>

Recently (1997-2001), archeologists Hanan Eshel and Magan Broshi discovered that the Essenes lived in some of the caves and

in tents adjacent to (but not in) the stone complex.<sup>6</sup> That is an interesting discovery, meaning that the scriptorium (Fig 2), “kitchens,” pay office, dining room, assembly area, and other authenticated loci comprised the “civic center,” which was separate from the “residential” area.

### The Dead Sea Scrolls

Two millennia passed from the time the scrolls were written until they were discovered in 1947. They are the most significant and oldest manuscripts that give scholarly authority to biblical texts and to the history of their time. The Dead Sea Scrolls have engendered both academic and lay interest. They are a unique resource for understanding the genesis of two of the world’s great religions. Lay interest in the scrolls is unusually intense.<sup>7</sup> The traditional and abbreviated version of the discovery tells us that “In 1947, young Bedouin shepherds, searching for a stray goat in the Judean Desert, entered a long-untouched cave and found jars filled with ancient scrolls. That initial discovery by the Bedouins yielded seven scrolls and began a search that lasted nearly a decade and eventually produced thousands of scroll fragments from eleven caves. During those same years, archaeologists searching for a habitation close to the caves that might help identify the people who deposited the scrolls, excavated the Qumran ruin, a complex of structures located on a barren terrace between the cliffs where the caves are found and the Dead Sea.

“Within a fairly short time after their discovery, historical, paleographic, and linguistic evidence, as well as carbon-14 dating, established that the scrolls and the Qumran ruin dated from the third century BCE to 68 CE They were indeed ancient! Coming from the late Second Temple Period, a time when Jesus of Nazareth lived, they are older than any other surviving manuscripts of the Hebrew Scriptures by almost one thousand years.”<sup>8</sup>

Scholar Donald Binder advanced an early argument in support of the Essene authorship. He tells us that Roland de Vaux, the first and



Fig 3. Sea Level, Approaching Qumran (Photo by the Author).

premier archeologist of Khirbet Qumran, posited the notion that the Essenes and the scrolls are indisputably connected. Most researchers have since accepted his conclusions. “De Vaux upheld the linkage by observing that the pottery in the caves can be dated to the same period as the abandoned site (1 CE), and, moreover, that inscriptions on ostraca (potsherds) found at Qumran match the style of writing found in the scrolls.

“The link between the scrolls and the Essenes has been ascertained through a comparison of the sectarian writings with descriptions of the Essenes found in the first-century writings of Philo, Josephus, and Pliny the Elder. Although discrepancies exist between the accounts, the similarities are striking and have convinced most researchers that the Dead Sea sect and the Essenes are one and the same.”<sup>9</sup>

### Visit to Qumran

In June of 1965, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan still controlled the area of the Dead Sea known as Wadi Qumran, which is now part of Israel (Fig 3). It was under Jordanian auspices that we visited the now famous site of the Dead Sea Scrolls. In those days, with permission, it was possible to enter the caves, witness the excavations, visit Qumran and, most importantly, meet with the site archeologists. We did all of that.

It was some years later that the ultimate importance of the scrolls was determined. As time unfolded, the history of biblical humanity became recorded history. Thanks to the Essenes, portions of the Bible and other vague oral history recitations became historically valid.

The 1990 hypotheses that no scrolls were created at Qumran seem unfounded. The photograph labeled “Scriptorium” was taken during our visit, along with information from the on site archeologists that: 1) long tables used for scribes were excavated from the room,<sup>10</sup> 2) ink wells were found there, 3) the adjacent caves contained the now famous cylindrical jars filled with the scrolls (as well as thousands of scroll fragments), and 4) the jars are unique to Qumran and, as one archeologist posited, were created locally for the purpose of scroll storage.

We visited Cave IV (Fig 4) in which it is reported that more than forty percent of the scrolls were discovered.<sup>11</sup> We spoke with an Arab worker who personally removed cylinders from the cave and who observed the contents of the cylinders (“scrolls, indeed,” exclaimed the worker). In the years that followed, many of the published photographs of Cave IV are mirrors of this photo, which was artlessly taken with an inadequate camera—the



Fig 4. Cave IV of Qumran (Photo by the Author).

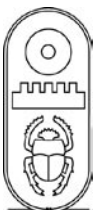




Fig 5. 1965 Excavations. (Photo by the Author).

author at the time not realizing the immense importance of the scrolls as time eventually revealed.



Fig 6. Grain Grinding Stones. (Photo by the Author).

Excavations in 1965 were still in progress (Fig 5) and contained, among many artifacts, cylinder fragments, scroll fragments, and hundreds of potsherds, indicating the presence of both the Essenes and the subsequent Roman invaders.<sup>12</sup>

Some of the interesting aspects of Essenian daily life were the presence of grain grinding stones (Fig 6) and the assembly hall/classroom (Fig 7). It was an easy task to visualize Qumran as it might have been.



Fig 7. Classroom area. (Photo by the Author).

As you might appreciate, there is an aura about the place, filling one's spirit with the continued presence of the Essenian aroma. It was a thrilling experience for us. Today, more than forty years later, we still remember every moment of our visit.

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Material not otherwise annotated is oral history, garnered by the author in pursuit of information during a visit to Qumran in June 1965. The onsite archeologists, names unknown, are the source of this orally transmitted material.

<sup>2</sup> Goodfellows Christian Ministry, Essenes, <http://members.aol.com/Wisdomway/deadseascrolls.htm>

<sup>3</sup> André Dupont-Sommer, *The Essene Writings From Qumran*, trans. G. Vermes, (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1962), 43.

<sup>4</sup> Dupont-Sommer, 43. Found above in "Ancient Literature on the Essenes" and online at [www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/philobook37.html](http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/philobook37.html).

<sup>5</sup> Oral History: See note 1.

<sup>6</sup> Donald D. Binder, "Qumran," <http://www.pohick.org/sts/qumran.html>.

<sup>7</sup> "Dead Sea Scrolls" Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica Online <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9033047>.

<sup>8</sup> Scrolls from the Dead Sea, Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/scrolls/toc.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Binder, "Qumran," <http://www.pohick.org/sts/qumran.html>.

<sup>10</sup> One of the arguments against Essenian authorship is that the long tables frequently cited as scriptorium artifacts were not traditionally used by scribes. The argument is that scribes traditionally sat on the ground, legs crossed, with the writing tablets on their legs. That would be a valid argument for tablets, but the Essenian scribes were creating long scrolls, for which long tables were ideally suited.

<sup>11</sup> Dead Sea Scrolls, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead\\_sea Scrolls](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead_sea Scrolls).

<sup>12</sup> Oral History: See Note 1.