

THE MYSTIC COMMUNITY OF ESSENES

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The nature of the Essenes and the Dead Sea Scrolls have continued to engage generations of seekers. This 1967 essay adapted from the *Rosicrucian Digest*, considers the mystical aspects of the Essene tradition.

There was eager anticipation in the years following the Second World War when the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. It was a discovery that engendered a growing consciousness of a unique order shrouded in mystery for centuries. Who were the Essenes who referred to themselves as “the sons of Zadok?” How did this mystical community evolve, and why?

The etymology of the word *Essene* (a moot topic) is Egyptian. Truly it is derived from the word *Kashai*, which means *secret*. Also meaning *secret* and *silent* is a Jewish word of similar sound, *chsahi*, which is translated as *Essene*.

The true origin of the Essenes is in the strange land of Egypt, where initiates of the ancient mystery schools enacted the Osirian mysteries in their temples; where “a secret gnosis” or “superiority of knowledge,” was transmitted by word of mouth to neophytes who were tested and found worthy, thus perpetuating an ancient tradition. In strict secrecy and confidence the *Kheri-Hebs* (Masters, Lector Priests) imparted to the seekers after truth the esoteric wisdom, which they received upon oath never to reveal to the profane masses nor to set down on papyri scrolls.

From far lands students came to study philosophy at Thebes, Heliopolis, and Alexandria, where the mystery schools had established branches. Many profound thinkers journeyed to Egypt; among them were Solomon, Pythagoras, Thales, Plato, and Democritus. From Egypt this gnosis or esoteric knowledge spread to other lands during the centuries prior to the Christian era; in Greece were found the Orders of the Therapeutae and the Pythagoreans, and, in Palestine, the Community of the Essenes.

In the period between the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian New Testament the Essenes of Palestine (there was also an Essene organization at Alexandria) had already established a branch north of Engedi on the western shore of the Dead Sea. Flavius Josephus, the Jewish historian, states that Essenes were to be found in every city ...

They were not a religious sect, as is often claimed. However, the Pharisees and Sadducees would have regarded them as such, since Essenic doctrines differed considerably from those of the former.

Their spiritual head was referred to as the “Teacher of Righteousness” and the

community looked upon him as a Messiah (*Mashiah*) or “Anointed One.” Essene commentators in their exegesis interpreted the Suffering Servant passages of Isaiah to refer to their own Teacher of Righteousness. The passage from the Book of Habakkuk 2:4, which reads, “...the just shall live by his faith,” which theologians interpret to mean Jesus, is

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in the Qumran manuscript interpreted as “the just shall live by their faith in the Teacher of Righteousness.”

The ancient historians Philo of Alexandria, Pliny the Elder, and Josephus, wrote of these Essenes in their histories. Their writings reflect the deep admiration and respect they felt for the associates of the Essene community. Indeed, the Essenes were a wonder of the ancient world, and have been called the “Brothers and Sisters in White Clothing,” “The Silent Ones,” “The Pure Ones,” and “The Physicians.”

Community Living

The Essenes practiced a form of community living wherein their property was jointly owned by the community, a system which was adopted by the early Church. In this community there was a Second Chamber, or a Hierarchy, which comprised twelve individuals and three priests. Their initiates were required to serve a probationary period of two years. They were allowed to partake neither of the Pure Meal of the Congregation until the completion of their first year nor of the Drink of the Congregation until completion of their second year. The candidates accepted by the Council of the Community would then enjoy the privileges of the community and their personal possessions would form part of the common pool.

Their community was self-sufficient. They pursued agriculture, though they were not exclusively vegetarians. They kept no slaves, and each member was required to do his or her share of menial work. They offered no sacrifices. They did not swear to any oath, for their word was their bond. The populace of the day knew this, for even King Herod The Great (37-34 BCE) exempted them from taking the oath of allegiance to the crown. Nor did they participate in disputes concerning religion or politics.

The Essenes built hospices (the forerunner of modern hospitals) in many

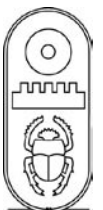
districts to assist the poor and needy and for the shelter of tired travelers. This formed a part of their humanitarian activities. Philo says that the aged among them were regarded with reverence and honor.

The Manual of Discipline

The Community of the New Covenant had statutes that maintained strict discipline among its members. Its code and precepts are published under the titles *The Manual of Discipline* and *The Damascus Document*. A copy of *The Damascus Document* was found in a genizah (a storehouse for damaged Hebrew writings and ritual objects) at Cairo in the early twentieth century and was published in 1910 by Solomon Schechter under the title *Fragments of a Zadokite Work*, while *The Manual of Discipline* has also been published as *The Rule for all the Congregation of Israel in the Last Days* and *The Community Rule*.

In their communal life they were particularly severe on those members who lied deliberately in matters of personal possessions or bore a grudge against another or transgressed any of the Mosaic laws or spoke in anger against priest or companion. In such cases, the member would be excluded from the Assembly for a period of time and do penance. In a few cases the member could be suspended, but reinstated upon probation for consideration of his or her case by the “Many.”

For slandering or murmuring against the Community, the penalty was excommunication for life. During an assembly of the congregation they sat in ranks, and they were to speak in accordance with the degree of their advancement. They frowned upon foolish speech or foolish laughter, talking out of turn, or interrupting another while he or she spoke. These transgressions met with due punishment, as did sleeping, or unnecessary exposure during a session. For any of these offenses the



member would do penance and be temporarily excluded from the “Purity of the Many.”

Though the Essenes, as a secret organization, went about their work quietly, from time to time certain members would go out and teach in public. The famous Essene, Menahem, became popular for his prophecy that Herod would one day reign as King of the Jews. Another Essene was John the Baptist, who Jesus said was Elijah returned. John heralded the news of the advent of the expected Savior. He urged repentance and practiced the Essenic rite of baptism. So close is the similarity between Essenic thought and the theology of Jesus that modern scholars are saying Jesus was a member of the Essene Order. The Essenes, not unlike the many Jewish sects that flourished in Palestine, had anticipated that the Messiah would be born within their fold.

The mysterious disappearance of the Essenes has often led to the belief that they merged into and became part of the Christian movement. This seems unlikely, for the Essenes were not a missionary group. Their members constituted an esoteric school, and membership was limited to the few sincere and worthy seekers. There can be no doubt, however, that they enthusiastically supported the early Christian Church. Indeed, Essenic influence upon Christianity has often brought about the statement that Essenism is “the mother of Christianity.”

Zend-Avesta Scriptures

They were students of the Zend-Avesta scriptures; also of the books and prophetic writings of the Old Testament. These

included the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha. In their Qumran library, fragments of every book of the Old Testament, except the Book of Esther, have been found. Preserved in its entirety is a text of the Book of Isaiah. Some of the books found in the Qumran caves at one time formed part of the Biblical canon, but were eventually discarded—such as the Book of Enoch, the Book of Jubilees, and the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs. The Dead Sea Scrolls antedate the hitherto oldest extant manuscripts of the Old Testament—the Hebrew Masoretic Text—by almost a thousand years.

What happened to the Essenes? It is believed that they fled their Dead Sea Community during the First Jewish War (66-70 CE) when the Roman Tenth Legion was in the vicinity. The Essenes somehow anticipated this, for they carefully prepared themselves to depart. A serious problem, however, had to do with the transportation of their manuscripts. It is now known that they hid part of their library in the neighboring Qumran caves. Then they trekked to Mt. Carmel in Palestine where they established their headquarters.

As mystical students, the Essenes sought the *summum bonum* of existence—the evolution of their spiritual being. They pursued a study and quest for atonement with the God-self, and the illumination gained from their experiences was to enhance the moral fiber of their existence and their humanitarian services to the world. They lived in simplicity and humility, in temperance and equity, and in purity and truth.

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