Definitions of religious groups vary greatly depending on the person or group who or which determine them: terms used in definitions shaped by “the other” and those of self-identification are determined by the cultural and social background of the speaker, as well as by the auditory to which the definition is addressed to. Self-identification means at the same time differentiation, and separation from the other, from the mainstream and/or from other religious groups.

An example of identification of the Qumran sect as “the other” is Josephus Flavius’ (BJ II.8.2–13; Ant XVIII.1.5) description of the various religious schools 〈haireses〉 of Hellenistic Judaism, which he characterizes on the basis of their concepts and beliefs. He presents them as varieties within Judaism, not distinguishing a mainstream and minor tendencies among them (even if the Temple and its priesthood must have been a decisive factor in religious matters since Hellenistic times). On the other hand he nowhere refers in his description to the history of any of the religious groups, and to the schisms which had given rise to them.

Josephus’ angle in describing these groups is their concepts and beliefs, and he never speaks of any special way of interpreting the Mosaic law as a difference between them (although practically he does so when relating that the members of the Essene community were allowed to accept food exclusively from the members of their group which is a reference to the common way of their keeping the food laws). Josephus’ description was destined for readers of Greek culture who were not acquainted with the Jewish purity system and for whom this passage may have been a curiosity.

Self-definitions of a group open quite different perspectives to the reader. Self-definition represents a continuous element in the life and history of any religious community. These definitions are not one-off events, they were shaped in various forms and at various times during the history of the community. The texts found at the Qumran site contain writings of a religious community, written at various times.
Several works go back before the middle of the second century when the Qumran settlement was established. Most of the texts originate from between the middle of the second century BCE and the first half of the first century CE. The Qumran group, the library of which was found in the caves neighbouring the Qumran site, came into existence in the middle of the second century BCE when the Qumran site was established as the separate center of a religious community. The date of physical separation from their environment is generally mentioned as the beginning of the Qumran sect. At the same time this event might have been the result and the closure of a preceding process which meant their spiritual deviation from their environment. During that process they must have attested even several acts of self-definition.

The First Jewish Sects

The history of the Jewish sects begins with the Persian period. The impacts of social and cultural changes—the termination of the Judean state and state cult (even if temporarily), the exilic existence—required a new statement of identity of the exiles, as well as of people who had remained in Judah. These tendencies resulted in the formation of new socio-religious groups in the diaspora as well as in Judah. The main characteristic and the way for these groups to survive was to preserve their identity by means of forced segregation from the local

---


2 The Qumran site bears archaeological evidence for the presence of a group in the Judaean desert between the middle of the 2nd century BCE and about 70 CE. At the same time people belonging to this group lived in various cities of the country: see Josephus’ report on their branch living in families, Jos. BJ 2: 119–26.

3 Socio-religious sub-groups like the “sons of prophets”, the Rechabites, and the Nazirites are also documented from the period of the divided monarchy.