For a long time now the majority of experts have agreed that the descriptions of the Essenes in Philo, Josephus, and Pliny so closely resemble the traits emerging from the scrolls found at Qumran that we are justified in calling their owners Essenes. Among the shared traits is the unusual approach to property mentioned in all of the sources. Every ancient writer on the Essenes, apart from those who did little more than mention them, commented on their communal life and handling of property. No other ancient Jewish group known to us held their possessions in common other than the first followers of Jesus described in Acts 2:1–5:11.

The sources noted above speak about the shared approach to goods as carried out by the Essenes, but experts have also shown that there are important differences between the accounts of their practice in the classical sources and the Qumran texts—and differences even within these categories of texts. So, for example, Todd Beall, in his valuable study *Josephus’ Description of the Essenes Illustrated by the Dead Sea Scrolls*, refers to the topic in several of his summary lists.

- Under “Probable parallels between Josephus and Qumran,” his third entry is: “One property common to all (J.W. 2 §122); they hold their possessions in common (Ant. 18 §20). (Supported by 1QS 1:11–12; 5:1–2; 6:17–22, but not by CD 9:10–16; 14:12–13).”
- Under “ Statements made by Josephus with no known Qumran parallel,” his second entry is: “When they journey (J.W. 2 §124–5). (Essene hospitality towards visitors).”
- Under “Apparent discrepancies between Josephus and Qumran,” the first entry is: “One property common to all (J.W. 2 §122). (CD indicates ownership).”

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1 Josephus’ *Description of the Essenes Illustrated by the Dead Sea Scrolls* (NTSMS 58; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 125–26, 128, 129.
As he often does, Beall suggests as a reason for what he sees as discrepancies that the texts reflect different stages in the group’s history. Since 1988, when his book was published, many other texts have become available, including the Cave 4 copies of the Damascus Document and the Serekh, and important developments in understanding the groups behind the scrolls located in the Qumran caves have taken place.

In this paper I will examine the statements in the classical and Qumran sources about collective ownership or control of possessions in order to determine more exactly if possible what the authors say about it and the kinds of communities they depict. This will precede some conclusions regarding sharing of possessions as presented in these sources—the ones that identify it explicitly as an Essene trait (Josephus and Philo) and in the ones in which this does not happen (the texts found at Qumran).3

1. Josephus

Though he is not the earliest author on the Essenes, his account is the longest and for that reason can be considered first.4 In various passages in J.W. 2.119–61 and Ant. 18.18–22 he deals with the practice of

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2 Ibid., 127, for example.


4 Josephus famously compared the Essenes with the Pythagoreans (Ant. 15.371), another group with whom a community of goods was associated in the ancient literature about them. A possible connection between Essenes and Pythagoreans has attracted a large amount of attention since the first discoveries of texts in the caves around Khirbet Qumran. See, for example, Justin Taylor, Pythagoreans and Essenes: Structural Parallels (Collection de la REJ; Paris-Louvain: Peeters, 2004) and the shorter surveys in Klauck, “Gütergemeinschaft,” especially 47–52; and McCabe, “How to Kill Things with Words,” 102–18.