WHO CARES AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?
QUMRAN AND THE ESSENES, ONCE AGAIN!

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The identity of the group that produced the sectarian literature found in the caves at Qumran, and that lived at the site in accordance with the way of life prescribed in these texts, has been much discussed since the discovery of the documents over fifty years ago.\(^1\) Among the various hypotheses offered, that identifying the Qumran group with the Essenes known from classical sources has won the most support and is closest to achieving a scholarly consensus.\(^2\) Nevertheless, a few dissenters remain who prefer not to tie the scrolls community too closely to any of the known groups.\(^3\) While all acknowledge the substantial overlap between the way of life of the Essenes and that of the Qumran community, all also acknowledge that there were some differences.\(^4\) How

\(^1\) For the evidence supporting the conclusion that a sectarian group lived at the site, and that that group was responsible for most, if not all, of the manuscripts found in the neighboring caves, see D. Dimant, "The Qumran Manuscripts: Content and Significance," Prepare the Way in the Wilderness (eds D. Dimant and L. Schiffman; Leiden: Brill, 1995) 23–58.

\(^2\) The most extensive discussion of this conclusion is T.S. Beall, Josephus’s Description of the Essenes Illustrated by the Dead Sea Scrolls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

\(^3\) For the purposes of this paper I ignore the stranger theories of Qumran origins that have arisen in the past decade. For further discussion see A.I. Baumgarten, “The Current State of Qumran Studies: Crisis in the Scrollery—A Dying Consensus,” Judaism in Late Antiquity, Part Three, Where We Stand: Issues and Debates in Ancient Judaism, Volume One (eds J. Neusner and A. Avery Peck; Leiden: Brill, 1999) 99–122. I focus here only on the “agnostic” view that considers some of the scrolls as sectarian and as foundational for the way of life of a group that lived at the site, but that does not identify that group with the Essenes. See above, n. 1.

\(^4\) See in particular, P.R. Davies, “Review of Todd S. Beall, Josephus’s Description of the Essenes Illustrated by the Dead Sea Scrolls,” JTS 41 (1990) 164–69. Even when the Essene hypothesis was in its energetic youth, in a key lecture delivered in 1966, F.M. Cross, Jr. recognized that Qumran and the Essenes shared “similar bizarre views, performing similar or rather identical lustrations, ritual meals and ceremonies” (emphases mine). Note the qualifications Cross felt impelled to introduce into his comparison in order to account for the similarities as well as differences. See F.M. Cross.
do we explain these differences and what weight do we assign them? The dissenters, conscious of the importance of small differences in the self-definition of small groups, assign these disparities great significance. When Josephus divided the Jews into three philosophies (War 2:119), and a similar division into three groups (identified by the code names Ephraim, Manasseh and Judah) is found in the Nahum Pesher, does that mean that all Jewish groups of the Second Temple era must fit into one of only three pigeonholes? Far from it, reply the dissenters. Josephus himself was aware of many more than three groups. He even labeled one group the Fourth Philosophy (Ant. 18:9 and 23–25). One may reply that this group was an offshoot of the Pharisees (Ant. 18:23), not really an independent philosophy, and hence its name does not contradict the basic threefold division. Along the same lines, one might argue that Josephus was anxious to deny all legitimacy to the Fourth Philosophy, hence calling it the “Fourth” Philosophy marked it as an idiosyncratic and deviant addition to the three genuine (legitimate) philosophies (War 2:118). These excuses, however, will not explain away Josephus’ remarks on John the Baptist, the early Christians, or his teacher Bannus (Ant. 18:116–119; 20:200; Life 11–12). Josephus did not connect any of these teachers with the three philosophies that supposedly represented all of Jewish experience. Thus, the division of the Jewish world into three—even though shared by Josephus and some Qumran texts—was schematic and ad hoc at best, and never meant to be exhaustive. Did those at Qumran call themselves by any name that could have yielded Essenes in Greek? In the view of the dissenters, none


3 See A.I. Baumgarten, “The Rule of the Martian as Applied to Qumran,” Israel Oriental Studies 14 (1994) 121–42. Since writing that paper I have learned that the formal name for the principle I called “the rule of the Martian” is “the narcissism of small differences.”
