ESSENES AT QUMRAN? A REJOINDER
TO ALBERT BAUMGARTEN

MAGEN BROSHI
Israel Museum

In his erudite, well-argued and elegant paper, A. Baumgarten (henceforth AB) has meticulously combed the vast Qumranic literature in order to disprove the hypothesis that the Qumran group is identical with the Essenes, the hypothesis that he describes as the “closest to a scholarly consensus.” He invited me, most graciously, to write a rejoinder. I accept his invitation and I will try to demonstrate where I think he is wrong.

The Tripartite Division of Judaism

When being told by Josephus that the Jews are divided into three philosophies (War 2:119), Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes, one may suspect oversimplification. After all he was writing to non-Jews who could not be bothered with fine distinctions and for whom he had to use familiar terms, e.g. “philosophies.” Were we fortunate enough to possess the original version of Jewish War, written in Josephus’ vernacular tongue (War 1:1, most probably Aramaic) and intended to be read by his fellow Jews, we might have a more nuanced description.

This tripartite division was amazingly confirmed by the evidence of the Scrolls, mostly the Nahum commentary, where Ephraim, Manasseh and Judah, as well as Nineveh, No Amon and Jerusalem, stand respectively for the Pharisees, Sadducees and the Essenes. The historical background of the Nahum Commentary is very clear: it is the invasion of the Seleucid king Demetrios Eukairos who was invited by the Pharisees in 88 BCE to fight the Hasmonean king Alexander Janneus; even AB does not deny the equations suggested for these code names.  

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AB’s effort to add new philosophies to the three on which both the Scrolls and Josephus agree is certainly wrong. Does he seriously suggest that Bannus, the solitary hermit, should represent a “philosophy”? He was probably quite close to the Essenes.

I submit that the three philosophies should be construed as three religious movements. These movements were neither diachronically nor synchronically homogeneous. The schools of Hillel and Shammai had strong disagreements, but there is no question that they both were Pharisaic. Likewise, the Essene movement was not monolithic: it included some members who were celibate and others who led, more or less, a normal family life and owned private property. Like practically every sect in world history, the Essenes suffered painful and acrimonious divisions, but there was only one Essene movement.

Qumran was an Essene Monastery

AB agrees with the consensual opinion that Qumran is the site Pliny wrote about, but he does not believe his testimony that it was occupied by Essenes. But Qumran shows so many traits of what we expect of an Essene monastery: the religious nature of the site (ten ritual baths, the densest occurrence of such structures); the communal character (a dining hall, only one kitchen, etc.); the lack of any sign of opulence (unplastered walls in a place occupied by people who could produce excellent plaster in their pools, unpaved floors, dull utilitarian pottery, etc.); the choice of a very inhospitable site (extremely hot climate, barren, scarcity of water); and above all the Scrolls.3 There is no question that the huge collection, inaccurately called library, comprising ca. 900 manuscripts, is homogeneous. It contains almost nothing that belongs to a different movement, and its backbone is clearly Essene. T.S. Beall enumerates 26 parallels between Josephus and Qumran, and 21 probable parallels.4 If we deduct some which are not particular to the Essenes (e.g., that they are Jews by birth) two or three


4 On Beall’s comparative study cf. J.C. VanderKam, The Dead Sea Scrolls Today