THE IDENTITY OF THE QUMRAN SECT:
A RECONSIDERATION

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It is now considered axiomatic by many scholars that the sectarian were Essenes. Consequently, at the commencement of this research, it was difficult not to follow an unsound method when studying the documents. As one read Josephus, Philo, Pliny, and the Qumran documents as if one were studying authorities describing the same sect, the unconscious tendency was to resolve the contradictions and to underline points of agreement. When Josephus appeared to conflict with the internal evidence, his testimony was rejected on various grounds; when the sectarian records were silent, without apology the details from Josephus or Philo were fitted in. Millar Burrows’ fair judgments are generally respected. He writes:

One must still, however, protest against the current tendency to use together what Josephus and Philo say of the Essenes and what the Dead Sea Scrolls reveal concerning the sect of Qumran, on the assumption that both bodies of data apply to one and the same group. To some it may seem pedantic to maintain this distinction, but for the purpose of accurate historical knowledge it is essential 1).

Again, others are more cautious, but associate the sect with “a number of groups which were similar but not identical”. Philo and Josephus say nothing about the use of the word “Essene” to cover a number of related groups (apart from the marrying order in Josephus): they write as if the Essenes were one sect.

The following call for serious consideration as possible identifications: Essenes; Pharisees; Sadducees; Samaritans; Karaites; Zealots.

Essenes

There are many affinities between the Qumran sect and the

Essenes. A common prohibition against spitting in the midst of the Assembly or to the right seems a strong one 1). Secondly, Qumran is thought to coincide with the location of the Essenes as described by Pliny in Historia Naturalis.

Pliny, Historia Naturalis, V, xv, 73, Loeb, Pliny Vol. II, p. 277:

"On the west side of the Dead Sea, but out of range of the noxious exhalations of the coast, is the solitary tribe of the Essenes, which is remarkable beyond all the other tribes in the whole world, as it has no women and has renounced all sexual desire, has no money and has only palm-trees for company. Day by day the throng of refugees is recruited to an equal number by numerous accessions of persons tired of life and driven thither by the waves of fortune to adopt their manners. Thus through thousands of ages (incredible to relate) a race in which no one is born lives on for ever: so prolific for their advantage is other men's weariness of life. Lying below the Essenes was formerly the town of Engedi, second only to Jerusalem in the fertility of its land and in its groves of palm-trees, but now like Jerusalem a heap of ashes. Next comes Masada, a fortress on a rock, itself also not far from the Dead Sea. This is the limit of Judaea".

A. Dupont-Sommer 2) suggests that there may have been many of these Essene settlements in the area of the Dead Sea. The removal of the community from the site in Herod's reign would be unlikely on the grounds of the King's antipathy, if the community was Essene, so perhaps the earthquake made the place dangerous, or their superstition made them anxious to leave.

The monastic practices of the Essenes as described by Josephus 3) and Philo 4), show many similarities with those of the Qumran community. In the Essene graded three-year noviciate there are remarkable affinities with the graded order laid down by the rule of the community. The three stages of the Essenes each lasted a year. The sectarian first step was not detailed: it varied in length

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2) C. Roth, "Were the Qumran Sectaries Essenes? A Re-examination of some Evidences", Journal Of Theological Studies, New Series X, 1959, pp. 87:93; A. Dupont-Sommer's, The Jewish Sect Of Qumran And The Essenes, (trans. R.D. Barnett), (London, 1954), pp. 397-402. Roth argues cogently that as Pliny writes in AD. 77 of the Essenes being still a live sect, he cannot mean them to be the Qumran community for according to the archaeological evidence the site was set fire to in A.D. 68. Dupont-Sommer does not think this applies because the tense is a "descriptive present" and it was an accepted practice of the ancient writers to write as if the people they were describing are still alive, whereas they knew that they were not.