A Note on the Qumran Sectarians, the Essenes and Josephus

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It is undoubtedly rash for one of Geza Vermes's pupils who has not specialized in the interpretation of the Dead Sea scrolls to offer in his honour a suggestion about the origins of the Qumran community directly opposed to the view that Geza himself has championed for most of his scholarly career. I do so primarily because I believe that the question should be resolved not by considering afresh the scrolls themselves but by a different appreciation of the writings of Josephus. As a result of this reconsideration, I shall suggest that the Essene hypothesis of Qumran origins is much less probable than is usually proposed.

The basis of the Essenes hypothesis lies in the similarities between the communal life laid down in the sectarian rules and the communal life ascribed to the Essenes by some of the Greek and Latin authors who referred to them. The site of Qumran can also be made, more or less, to correspond to the location of the Essenes asserted by Pliny, and one period of occupation of the site coincides with the efflorescence of Essenes in the late Second Temple period. Acknowledged discrepancies, such as the emphasis on common ownership of property and on celibacy, which rank high in some of the classical descriptions of the Essenes but are not found in every group depicted in the scrolls, can be explained away by a number of plausible strategies: the differences may reflect different groups of Essenes, or different stages of the development of the sect, or the differing viewpoints of 'insider' compared to 'outsider' accounts. Above all, it is averred, the Essene theory 'is to be preferred to theories linking Qumran with the Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots,

1 I am grateful to Emanuel Tov and especially to Geza Vermes for their helpful, if sceptical, comments on this short paper. I have kept references to modern discussions to a minimum, in the belief that extensive bibliographical information will not be needed for readers of this Journal, since the wise editorial policy of Geza Vermes over many years has ensured that new scholarship on the Dead Sea scrolls has frequently featured on its pages.

2 Most discussions of the relationship of Josephus' writings to the Qumran scrolls take for granted that the sectarians were Essenes. Cf., for example, T. S. Beall, Josephus' Description of the Essenes illustrated by the Dead Sea Scrolls (1988). Many of the points that I am making in this brief study have been raised before as a possibility by scholars ever since Louis Ginzberg, An Unknown Jewish Sect (original German edn. 1922; rev. English edn. 1976). The case seems to me to be worth restating because even those scholars most acutely aware of the dangers of parallelomania in other fields, such as the comparison of the New Testament to rabbinic literature, seem to drop their guard when they come to consider the identity of the Dead Sea sect.

3 The comparison is laid out most clearly in E. Schürer, The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ, ed. G. Vermes et al., vol. II (1979), pp. 583–5.


Judaeo-Christians, not to mention the medieval Karaite.7

It is not my intention to dispute the plausibility of any of this hypothesis as it stands, but simply to draw attention to one crucial presupposition which underlies it. Arguments about which of the Jewish groups known from the extant literary sources to have existed in late Second Temple Judaea should be identified with the Qumran sectarians take for granted that the extant sources provide, between them, a full list of such groups. If that were so, it would indeed be the task of scholarship to adjudicate between the claims of different groups to be identified with the Qumran sectarians. But it seems to me demonstrably unlikely that such a full list survives.

It is easy to show that all the extant literary sources apart from Josephus provide only a partial picture of first-century Judaism. If only the New Testament and the rabbinic tradition survived, modern scholars would know about Pharisees and Sadducees but not Essenes; since at least one amoraic rabbi asserted that there were no fewer than twenty-four groups of heretics within Judaism before 70 C.E., that rabbi, if he thought at all about the implications of his assertion, must have assumed that most such groups had names which later Jews no longer recalled.8 If only the voluminous writings of Philo survived, modern scholars would know about Essenes but not Pharisees or Sadducees. If scholars had to rely on the testimony of the non-Jewish pagan authors who referred to the Jews, they would learn many bizarre myths about Judaism, but nothing at all about the existence of various groups within Judaism: in none of the writings of these authors does any reference to Pharisees or Sadducees survive, and Pliny and Dio Chrysostom, who did refer to Essenes, did not describe them as a type of Jew.9 The reason for the inadequacy of all these sources lies not in censorship, nor even necessarily in ignorance (although that best explains the vagaries of some of the non-Jewish accounts), but in the interests of the authors and of the Christian and rabbinic traditions which preserved their texts. Rabbis were not interested in non-rabbinic Jews except in so far as disputes with them generated new halakha;10 early Christians were primarily interested either in ancient Israel or in those types of Jews with whom Jesus and his earliest followers came into contact and sometimes conflict, not in Judaism for its own sake.11

The only ancient author to mention Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots and Judaeo-Christians as well as Essenes, was Josephus. The question to be addressed is therefore whether Josephus, who came from first-century Judaea,

8 Cf. ySanh. 29c: 'R. Yohanan said, "Israel did not go into exile until there had been made twenty-four sects of minim."' I do not suggest that this tradition should be taken as a serious reflection of Second-Temple times, since the number 24 is probably symbolic and the correlation between division within Israel and Israel's exile was a standard rabbinic motif.
9 See the sources collected in M. Stern, Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism, 3 vols. (1974–86).
and had a deep interest in religious questions, attempted in his writings to produce a full picture of the different religious groups within his society.

Curiously, in the one work where Josephus explicitly claimed to be describing Judaism as it was, the *Contra Apionem*, he denied the existence of variety within Judaism altogether. According to *C.Ap.* 2.179–8, all Jews agree on everything about the nature of the divine and about the correct way to worship and obey the commandments; this 'admirable harmony' (*C.Ap.* 2.179) under the tutelage of the priests (*C.Ap.* 2.185–7) marks them off from other peoples, and especially from Greeks. Doubtless Josephus' picture was idealized, but the innocent reader of *Contra Apionem*, assumed by Josephus to be a gentle in need of instruction about the nature of Judaism, would be quite unaware of religious divisions within Jewish society.12 If he or she was sufficiently curious to follow up Josephus' references in *Contra Apionem* to his earlier works (*C.Ap.* 1.47–56), the discrepancies might have seemed rather startling.

In all three of those earlier works Josephus wrote, as is notorious, about the three hairesis ('schools of thought') within Judaism (*B.J.* 2.119; *A.J.* 13.171; 18.11; *Vita* 10); in *B.J.* 2.119, the three groups are described as types of philosophy. The description of these philosophies was evidently a set-piece, originally composed either by Josephus or by someone else. At *A.J.* 18.11 Josephus referred the reader to his account in *B.J.* 2.119–66, and a similar account, perhaps derived indirectly from Josephus, survives in the writings of Hippolytus of Rome (*Refutation of all Heresies* 9.18–28).13 This is the closest that Josephus came to claiming to produce a list of the different groups or tendencies within Judaism. Was it intended to be complete?

The question once asked, is instantly answered. Josephus' entire reason for inserting a description of the three philosophies into the narrative at *B.J.* 2.119–66 and *A.J.* 18.11–22 was to introduce a fourth philosophy, entirely novel in 6 C.E. and dedicated to the anarchist doctrine that Jews should call no-one their leader and master apart from God (*B.J.* 2.108; *A.J.* 18.23). It is not my purpose here to rehearse the problems of the inconsistencies in Josephus' accounts of this philosophy, nor the much-debated question of its influence on either sicarii or zealots.14 My intention is only to discuss Josephus' literary purpose.

Josephus described the three old philosophies in order to claim that a fourth group had made a major historical impact on first-century Judaea. The whole point of the passages in *B.J.* 2.119–66 and *A.J.* 18.11–22 was to assert that there were *four* types of Judaism. Yet when Josephus described his own upbringing at *Vita* 10–11, he reverted to the enumeration of the Jewish

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philosophies as three: 'at about the age of sixteen I wished to get experience of the schools of thought to be found among us. There are three of these—Pharisees the first, Sadducees the second, Essenes the third—as we have often remarked.' Thus he managed to combine his own assertion that there were four Jewish haireseis with the continuing assumption that there were really only three.

Quite apart from the Fourth Philosophy, Josephus was of course aware of numerous other types of Judaism. In Vita 12, immediately after his reference to 'the' three, he described the ascetic Judaism of Bannus. In A.J. 18.259 he described Philo as 'not inexpert in philosophy'. He referred elsewhere to the religious teachings of John the Baptist, Jesus and numerous mavericks: not all won his approval, but all were assumed by him to be teaching some distinctive kind of Judaism. It seems certain that Josephus did not intend to encompass all varieties of contemporary Judaism in his set-piece description of the three haireseis.

If this appraisal of Josephus' intentions is correct, the Essene hypothesis of Qumran origins will come to seem rather less compelling. It is undoubtedly true that the information about the lives of the sectarians in IQS is closer to the description of the Essenes in the classical sources than to that of any other group described by those writers, but when new evidence turned up by chance in the Judaean Desert, scholars should not have been looking for a direct correlation between the new material and what was already known. It was always more plausible that the new evidence would tell them about a type or types of Judaism previously undiscovered. It is a truism that most information about late Second Temple Judaism is now irretrievably lost, since the same is true about every aspect of the ancient world. It would be remarkable if the new evidence happened to fit precisely with the partial literary record.

Thus, it is up to proponents of the Essene hypothesis to make their case. None of the published documents from Qumran refers to the sectarians as Essenes or by any Semitic word of similar derivation or meaning. This fact can of course be explained away by adherents of the Essene hypothesis—members of a group may never use in 'insider' literature the collective name for themselves which they use when presenting themselves to the rest of the world—but it does put the onus of persuasion on those who advocate the Essene identity of the Qumran sect.\footnote{A similar point is made on the simple grounds of general scholarly scepticism by S. Talmon, 'The community of the Renewed Covenant: Between Judaism and Christianity', in E. Ulrich and J. Vanderkam (eds.), The Community of the Renewed Covenant (1994), pp. 5–10.}

I have left to the end the arguments from archaeology. Here I must begin by stating that, in the light of the archaeological evidence alone, it seems overwhelmingly likely that the site at Qumran was used by ascetic Jews. Apart from the curious choice of location for a settlement, the strongest argument lies in the insistence of the inhabitants on producing their own pottery in an area where fuel supplies for the kiln were very hard to obtain: such expenditure of effort to ensure control over the production, and hence the purity, of vessels for food makes most sense in the light of notions about kashrut derived from
Leviticus.\textsuperscript{16}

Pliny and Dio Chrysostom both located a settlement of Essenes somewhere in the region of Qumran.\textsuperscript{17} That in itself makes identification possible, but no more. Arguments from silence about archaeological data are perhaps the most dubious of all. More investigation may always turn up something new. It is not even true that Qumran was the only settlement of its type near the Dead Sea: the site of En el-Ghuweir, discovered in the 1970s, is similar.\textsuperscript{18} Numerous other sites could emerge at any time in areas still insufficiently explored. Archaeologists do not even know exactly what they are looking for. Pliny unhelpfully described the Essenes as at a distance (unspecified) from the shore of the Dead Sea, but with the company of palm trees; Dio Chrysostom described them as an 'entire and prosperous city' which, if true, would suggest somewhere rather more substantial than the Qumran remains reveal.\textsuperscript{19} It is salutary to recognise that the interpretation of a site through the perspective of literary texts belongs to a tradition of biblical archaeology that archaeologists in other areas of both Jewish and Roman history have been at pains to avoid over the past decades.

The implications of my essentially negative remarks are in fact quite positive. I suggest that the logical response of scholars to the chance discovery of texts in the Judaean Desert should not have been to try to fit the information from them into what was already known through the texts preserved by Jews and Christians by regular copying since antiquity. Rather, the new evidence has revealed aspects of Judaism previously unknown. The Dead Sea sectarians had many important preoccupations in common with other contemporary Jews such as biblical interpretation, eschatology, \textit{halakha} and purity; the similarities should not surprise, since all forms of first-century Judaism derived ultimately from the Torah and were subjected to similar cultural and social influences. The details which have most impressed adherents of the Essene hypothesis—common ownership and the celibacy of some members of the sect—are in fact found only in one of the Qumran documents, the Community Rule.\textsuperscript{20} It is notorious in studies of other societies that to sectarians themselves the differences which seem to the outsider least significant may often appear the most important factor in their self-definition.\textsuperscript{21} In sum, the details which have led scholars to identify the Qumran sectarians with other Jewish groups can be most plausibly explained by the common origin of all such groups in first-century Judaism.

The message of the scrolls, if they were not composed by Essenes, is thus evident. It is that the extent of variety within first-century Judaism was even greater than anyone could have known before the scrolls were found. The

\textsuperscript{16} See, most conveniently, R. De Vaux, \textit{Archaeology and the Dead Sea Scrolls} (1973).
\textsuperscript{17} On the text in Pliny, see above, n. 4. Dio Chrysostom, in Synesius of Cyrene, \textit{Dio} 3, 2, locates the Essenes 'near the Dead Sea, in the centre of Palestine, not far from Sodom'.
\textsuperscript{19} There is no extant parallel to the reference in Dio to a city of Essenes.
\textsuperscript{20} Cf. Vermes and Goodman, \textit{Essenes According to Classical Sources}, pp. 7–8.
\textsuperscript{21} I owe this observation, which is backed by many studies of modern sects, to Al Baumgarten, from whom I have learned much about the nature of sectarianism.
importance of this insight for the history of Judaism and the origins of Christianity should not require elaboration. The scrolls have provided a unique opportunity to counteract the weight of later traditions, to discover just some elements of the Judaism of the first century which both rabbis and Christians were to forget.²²

²² This is also the main contention of Talmon, 'Community of the Renewed Covenant', pp. 3-23.