Beyond The Dead Sea Scrolls Essay, Research Paper

BEYOND THE DEAD SEA: THE ESSENES AND THE QUMRAN COMMUNITY

To paraphrase the Bobby Darin pop hit, “Somewhere, beyond the Dead Sea, there s a religion waiting for me.” There was a serious lack of documentation on Judaism practices prior to the birth of Christ, which made understanding the reasons behind the emergence of Christianity even more complex. Then, in 1947, while a young Arab boy, Muhammad ed-Dhib, was throwing stones at a cave, breaking a jar with one, therein were contained the complete scrolled texts of the Old Testament, known thereafter as the Dead Sea scrolls. Although theologians are divided as to who actually wrote down the texts, it is widely attributed to the Essene monastic sect, which had lived in the Qumran region.

The actual origin of the Essenes is unknown, but it is believed that they evolved from the Hasidim of pre-Hasmonean times, approximately 170 B.C. They were first written about by Josephus, who was impressed by their seemingly innate ability to forecast the future. Josephus described how Judas, perhaps the most famous Essene, successfully predicted that the ruler of Judea, Aristobulus, would kill his brother. It is believed that the Essenes were one of the first all-male monastic orders, and it is uncertain whether they were exclusively Jewish in origin, or if the group had roots in Greek philosophy as well.

Organizationally speaking, the Essenes were a singular entity, presided over by a president, who was obeyed unconditionally. There were four classes of Essenes, according to Josephus, which consisted of children at the first class, novices occupying the second and third classes, with full members comprising the esteemed fourth class. It was a democratic order, with trials ordered to execute any disciplinary action against a member, requiring the affirmation of one hundred members. Excommunication always resulted in starvation death, as members would not eat food prepared by anyone outside of the group for fear of pollution.

Their lifestyle was simplistic and extremely chauvinistic, and the Essene mistrust of women is revealed in the Book of Enoch. According to this text, those Essenes which deviated from the policy excluding women were committing blasphemy: “But you have changed your works, [and have not done according to his command, and transgressed against him; (and have spoken) haughty and harsh words, with your impure mouths, [against his majesty, for your heart is hard]. You will have no peace… [They (the leaders) and all ... of them took for themselves] wives from all that they chose and [they began to cohabit with them and to defile themselves with them]; and to teach them sorcery and [spells and the cutting of roots; and to acquaint them with herbs.] Clearly, women were not welcome additions to the Essene family, which could perhaps explain its inevitable downfall. After all, without procreation, how can a religion be passed down from generation to generation?

Philo gave what many scholars believe is a first-hand account of the Essenes daily life: “They do not offer animal sacrifice, judging it more fitting to render their minds truly holy. They flee the cities and live in villages where clean air and clean social life abound. They either work in the fields or in crafts that contribute to peace. They do not hoard silver and gold and do not acquire great land holdings; procuring for themselves only what is necessary for life. Thus they live without goods and without property, not by misfortune, but out of preference. They do not make armaments of any kind. They do not keep slaves and detest slavery. They avoid wholesale and retail commerce, believing that such activity excites one to cupidity. With respect to philosophy, they dismiss logic but have an extremely high regard for virtue. They honor the Sabbath with great respect over the other days of the week. They have an internal rule which all learn, together with rules on piety, holiness, justice and the knowledge of good and their minds truly holy. Their exclusion of women is explained by Philo as a necessary sacrifice for the higher good of their community. They live together in brotherhoods, and eat in common together. Everything they do is for the common good of the group. Seeing it as an obstacle to communal life, they have banned marriage. They view women as selfish, excessively jealous, skillful in seduction and armed, like actors with all sorts of masks designed to flatter and ensnare men, bewitching and capturing their attention and finally leading them astray. The husband, bound by his wife’s spells, or anxious for his children from natural necessity, is no more the same to the others, but becomes a different man; instead of a freeman, he becomes a slave. Clearly, the Essenes were an extremist group with convictions that were certainly radical for their time.

The beginning of the end for the Essenes began with a confrontation at Qumran with a rival extremist Jewish sect known as the Sadducees, or “Sons of Zadok.” Unlike other Jewish groups, the Sadducees did not believe that there were opposing spirits of good and evil. Most importantly, they did not believe in any kind of spiritual life after death, spiritual or otherwise; For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit. In other words, there is life here and now and nothing beyond. It may be affected by the exercise of free will, but God s blessings could only be received during one s mortal life. In other words, there was no eternal life in the Kingdom of God according to the Sadducees.

Both the Essenes and Sadducees are no more, with both groups apparently being among the victims of Jerusalem s downfall in 70 A.D. What remains are the remnants of their teachings, which have been incorporated in Judeo-Christian doctrine. The Essenes are noteworthy in that they deviated from the popularly-accepted practice of slavery. The Sadducees laid the foundation for prevailing modern-day philosophy of Existentialism, which embraced the concept of free will and the responsibility that goes with it. They might have been forgotten altogether, had it not been for a stone-throwing Arab shepherd boy and the scrolls he discovered over 50 years ago. The Essenes and the Sadducees might be as dead as the Dead Sea itself, but as long as the scrolls remain, so, too, will their theological legacy.

Works Cited

Cross, Frank Moore Jr. “The Ancient Library of Qumran and

Modern Biblical Studies.” New York: Doubleday, 1958.

Dupont- Sommer. “The Essene Writings From Qumran.” Oxford:

Basil Blackwell, 1969.

Grundy, Robert H. “A Survey of The New Testament.” Grand

Rapids: Zondervan, 1994.

Vermes, Giza. “The Dead Sea Scrolls.” Cleveland: William

Collins, 1978.