

The Essenes

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The Essenes

This paper addresses several aspects of an ancient middle-east population called the Essenes. It will address three aspects of that population:

- Who they were and their societal norms
- Their relationship to the Dead Sea Scrolls
- Jesus and the Essenes

From the earliest days of my Masonic journey – and even before being raised as a Master Mason

-- I was intrigued by the “mysteries” that were dangled in front of me by my family members who had attained that honor before me: my brother, my uncles, and my cousin, all of whom adhered to the established dictum that if I wanted to be one, I had to ask one. All of them said that they would be glad to sign my petition, but they would not provide any specific information regarding the Craft.

Undaunted and determined to learn as much as I could before committing to what would become a permanent part of my life, I set out to learn as much as I could before requesting a petition. As we all have learned, there is far more information “out there” than one could reasonably acquire over an average lifetime, and much of what is published is antithetical to the reality of the tenets of the Fraternity. Separating the “wheat from the chaff” was an arduous task.

The availability and expansion of the Internet only exacerbated the problem. The availability of so much contradictory “information” that played around the edges

of the truth made it very difficult to form an accurate opinion. Nevertheless, once admitted to the Fraternity, I was in the company of veteran Brethren who impressed upon me an accurate understanding of what Freemasonry was about and how it could add value to my life.

The more I learned from my interactions with my Lodge brethren, the more I wanted to discover about the roots of our gentle craft, so I set about acquiring as much “old” information as I could, usually in the form of books written by Brethren long ago – closer to the earliest foundations of Freemasonry.

Among the books I acquired were several very old pocket-size cypher books that had been written to help Brethren remember how to accomplish ritual work in their Lodge. The oldest ritual book I acquired was *ECCE ORIENTI, The Rites and Ceremonies of the Essenes*. This Ninth Edition copy was published in 1874ⁱ and after just a few pages of clear text wherein there was a brief section describing the origin of the Order, most of the rest of the book is written in cypher. A quick look at the cypher showed it to be remarkably similar to our current work.

I had never heard of the Essenes and that fact along with the rather easily decipherable ritual that was so similar to our own ritual piqued my curiosity and I determined to find out as much as I could about this Masonic sect. There were some surprising aspects discovered in that research.

Who were the Essenes?

By their own self-description in the ritual book section entitled “The Ancient Essenes – Origin of the Order”:

“The name Essene is derived from the Hebrew root “Esan,” meaning to be strong, because they exhibited the strength of mind in enduring suffering, and in subduing the passions; the Essenes were an order of the Jews, and the fact that they developed themselves, and at first imperceptibly, through intensifying the then present religious doctrines, renders it impossible to say precisely at what time they were detached from the general body.”ⁱⁱ

More direct and timely historical descriptions of the Ancient Essenes were provided by ancient writers such as Flavius Josephus, Philo, Pliny, and others ... Josephus speaks of the Ossaeans of Qumran, while Philo speaks of the Therapeutae who were a branch of the Nasaraean Essenes. These writers variously lived during an era extending from 30 B.C. to 100 A.D. ⁱⁱⁱ

Flavius Josephus had a most thorough description of the Ancient Essenes:

“The Essenes are Jews by race but are more closely united among themselves by mutual affection, and by their efforts to cultivate a more saintly life. They renounce pleasure as an evil and regard continence and resistance to passions as a virtue. They disdain marriage for themselves, being content to adopt children of others at a tender age in order to instruct them. They do not abolish marriage but are convinced women are all licentious and incapable of fidelity to one man.

They despise riches. When they enter the sect, they must surrender all their money and possessions into the common fund, to be put at the disposal of everyone; one single property for the whole group. Therefore, neither the humiliation of poverty nor the pride of possession is to be seen anywhere among them.
iv

Pliny the Elder wrote:

"To the west (of the Dead Sea) the Essenes have put the necessary distance between themselves and the insalubrious shore. They are a people unique of its kind and admirable beyond all others in the whole world, without women and renouncing love entirely, without money and having for company only palm trees. Owing to the throng of newcomers, these people are daily reborn in equal number; indeed, those whom, wearied by the fluctuations of fortune, life leads to adopt their customs, stream in in great numbers."^v

Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, writing around 300 A.D., described the Essenes as a virtuous people:

“Even in our day, there are still those whose only guide is Deity; ones who live by the true reason of nature, not only themselves free but filling their neighbors with the spirit of freedom. They are not very numerous indeed, but that is not strange, for the highest nobility is ever rare; and then these have turned aside from the vulgar herd to devote themselves to a contemplation of nature’s verities. They pray, if it were possible, that they may reform our fallen lives; but

if they cannot, owing to the tide of evils and wrongs which surge up in cities, they flee away, lest they too be swept off their feet by the force of the current. And we, if we had a true zeal for self-improvement, would have to track them to their own places of retreat, and, halting as supplicants before them, would beseech them to come to us and tame our life grown too fierce and wild; preaching instead of war and slavery and untold ills, their Gospel of Peace and freedom, and all the fullness of other blessings.”^{vi}

As I read this writing of Eusebius, it occurred to me that in broad terms he might have written an apt description of the members of our gentle craft. We are not very numerous in the grand scale of the world’s population – a few million souls amongst billions – but we in our Lodges, Chapters, and Commanderies provide a safe haven against the “evils and wrongs that surge up in cities” and we welcome men of good character who may be beset by the tide of evils and wrongs and who are seeking self-improvement.

The Essenes and the Dead Sea Scrolls

(The following was excerpted from <https://www.ancient-origins.net/history/essenes-0012748>)

“The Dead Sea Scrolls, known also as the Qumran Cave Scrolls, were first discovered in 1947 in a cave in Wadi Qumran (on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea), in the West Bank. It is generally accepted that the discovery was first made by a Bedouin goat/sheep-herder named Mohammed Ahmed el-Hamed. The story goes that when el-Hamed threw a rock into a cave to drive out one of his missing animals, the

projectile shattered a pot, piquing his curiosity. “

“As he entered the cave, el-Hamed found several ancient jars that held scrolls wrapped in linen. The scrolls soon came to the attention of scholars, and, subsequently, around 850 documents were discovered in 11 caves in and around Wadi Qumran.”

“The Dead Sea Scrolls pose many questions that have yet to be answered, one of them being their authorship. The dominant theory, until the 1990s, at least, states that the documents were written by the Essenes. This is supported by a number of arguments. For instance, the Community Rule contains a description of the initiation ceremony of new members, which bears striking similarities to Josephus’ account of the Essene initiation ceremony.”

“In addition, both the Community Rule and Josephus talk about the communal ownership practiced by the Essenes. Furthermore, at the site of Khirbet Qumran, water cisterns were found during the excavation, and these may have been used for ritual bathing, an important aspect of Essene religious life. Some scholars also believe that Khirbet Qumran was the Essene settlement mentioned by Pliny.”

“Apart from the similarities between Josephus’ description of the Essenes and the contents of the Community Rule, the Dead Sea Scrolls provide further information about this sect, assuming it was indeed the Essenes who wrote them. For instance, the document known as the *War of the Sons of Light Against the Sons of Darkness* (known also as the *War Scroll*), provides an insight into the eschatological views of the Essenes.”^{vii}

Was Jesus influenced by Essene principles?

For quite some time I had considered the possibility that Jesus may have spent quite a bit of his life within the Essene community and may have been influenced by their precepts and lifestyle. Some of my thinking is based on the “missing years,” from age 12 to 30. Luke 2:41-52 describes Jesus at age 12 at the Temple during Passover. There is no further mention of Him, biblically, until age 30. Most of the biblical thought-leaders simply assume that He spent those 18 years working as a carpenter in Nazareth before beginning His ministry.

Most of the written commentary concerning the “missing years” agrees:

“Following the accounts of Jesus’ young life, there is a gap of about 18 years in His story in the New Testament. Other than the statement that after He was 12 years old ([Luke 2:42](#)) Jesus ‘advanced in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men’ ([Luke](#)

[2:52](#)), the New Testament has no other details regarding the gap. Christian tradition suggests that Jesus simply lived in Galilee during that period. Modern scholarship holds that there is little historical information to determine what happened during those years.”^{viii}

For me, then, the lack of written history and the Jewish customs of that age fairly reject the thought that He traveled and was influenced by the Essenes; specifically,

“The ages of 12 and 29, the approximate ages at either end of the

unknown years, have some significance in Judaism of the Second Temple Period: 13 is the age of the bar mitzvah, the age of secular maturity, and 30 the age of readiness for the priesthood.”^{ix}

Ancient vs. Modern Essenes

As a final note, this paper discusses the Ancient Essenes. The cypher book that piqued my curiosity so many years ago was a publication of Modern (19th century) Essenes, a sect that exists to this day. It uses ritual wording highly similar to that which we use, substituting the word Essenes for today’s member identifiers. For example, in the opening ritual, their encyphered text translates as: “Brother Senior Warden, proceed to satisfy yourself that all present are Master Essenes.”^x So, it appears that the Modern Essenes have simply adopted standard Freemasonry ritual language. According to one source regarding the modern Essenes:

“The Essenes as a sect of Judaism do not exist today. However, there are fringe groups that call themselves Essenes. One such group is the Essene Church of Christ, which declares itself to be ‘the authorized custodians and chief disseminators of the true teachings of Lord Christ and Lady Christ.’ Their “holy book” is something other than the Bible; they rely heavily on mysticism and occult revelation; they believe they and they alone possess truth; they deny the Trinity; and they deny biblical doctrines including original sin, heaven, hell, and salvation through Christ.”^{xi}

In conclusion, knowledge of the Essenes and their effects and influences on the cultures of the day will remain a source of

conjecture and theorizing. Still, for me, it is a fascinating study.

ⁱ It is important to note here that this cypher book was written as a memory aid for the Modern Essenes. More about the current sect later.

ⁱⁱ Ecce Orienti or Rites and Ceremonies of the Essenes, p. 5 (1874)

ⁱⁱⁱ Ancient Historians & The Essenes, <https://essene.com/Jostory/AncientHistoriansAndEssenes.html>, retrieved 9/28/2020.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid

^{vii} <https://www.ancient-origins.net/history/essenes-0012748>

^{viii} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unknown_years_of_Jesus

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Op. Cit. Ecce Orienti, p. 14

^{xi} <https://www.gotquestions.org/Essenes.html>

