

Waiting for the Messiah: the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Origins of Christianity

by Moshe Dann (May 2015)

Who was the first Christian? What are the origins of Christianity? Most people would say, "Jesus." What if that were not true? What if Jesus and at least some of his disciples had been influenced by or were followers of the Essenes – the people who copied, collected and wrote the scrolls at the beginning of the 2nd century BCE?

The key figure in Jesus' life was John the Baptist, who was influenced by and perhaps even a member of the Essene community. The only literary reference we have for him is in the New Testament. His intimate relationship with Jesus and his custom of ritual washing (derived from the Jewish concept of *mikveh*) launched Jesus' prophetic mission. After immersing in the Jordan River – "baptized" by John – Jesus "rose out of the water and the heavens opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lightening upon him..." (Matthew 3:16) John was the midwife of Jesus' first recorded experience of divine revelation.

This provides the first clue of a connection between the Essenes in the Second Temple period and the beginnings of what became Christianity. There are two sources of information about the Essenes: contemporary Roman historians, like Josephus, and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Josephus (The Jewish War, Bk.II, Ch.7) describes the Essenes as "Jews by birth" who lived a communal, pietistic and celibate life. They were, however, stricter than other Jews, "for not only do they prepare their meals the previous day so as to avoid lighting a fire on the Sabbath, they do not remove any utensil, or go and ease themselves." According to their view, one should not relieve oneself on the Sabbath! This may be based on their interpretation of the Biblical requirement to dig a hole for this purpose outside the encampment and whether it was permitted on Shabbat. (Deut.23:14)

The origin of the Essenes is unknown. By the second century BCE, many groups had begun to form in the new Judean state ruled by the Hasmonean dynasty. Among them, according to Josephus, were Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. Pharisees were probably more closely associated with the rabbinic tradition; the Sadducees were a small group of wealthy aristocrats, including priests who, like the Essenes, did not accept the Oral Torah. Due to their close relations

with the Roman authorities, they were politically powerful. The Essenes, according to most scholars, lived in Jerusalem as well as Qumran and perhaps other desert retreats. They copied and collected Biblical, apocryphal and sectarian texts which came to be known as The Dead Sea Scrolls.

In Judaism, *mikveh* is a spiritual renewal and primarily a ritual purification for women after menstruation ceases, and is also a required for men as well in certain cases, although today it is usually customary. During the First and Second Temple periods, immersion in a *mikveh* was required before ascending to the Temple Mount and for other forms of purification. The Essenes believed that ritual washing was essential for repentance and in preparation for purification by the Holy Spirit at the Messianic end of time, and, since they believed in the imminent coming of the messiah, they needed to maintain a constant state of ritual purity. Christians adopted this notion of ritual purity as baptism, a symbol of death and rebirth, and later as a ritual cleansing of the participant from "original sin."

Rejecting Temple priesthood, which no doubt represented mainstream Judaism of that time, the Essenes also used some form of a solar calendar. This may indicate a break with the way in which Jews determine new months and holidays, or perhaps it was simply a way of calculating precise hourly time. And they believed in predestination, contrary to the fundamental Jewish belief in free will, and an imminent apocalypse.

Were they still practicing Judaism? Although difficult to judge from our perspective, there is no doubt that they believed they were observant Jews. Their strictly literal, "fundamentalist" interpretation of Torah, however, combined with their deviations, placed them on the fringes of Jewish society. This was, indeed, exactly where they wanted to be, for they viewed their society as totally corrupt and on the verge of destruction.

Not only did they reject Pharisaic laws and teachings – which probably became known as "rabbinic Judaism" – they considered these laws to be abominations. Any law not expressly given in the Torah was forbidden. Only "hidden" laws, inspired by their own revelations were permitted. For example, although divorce is mentioned specifically in the Torah, the Essenes did not allow it.

In rejecting the authority of Oral Torah and substituting their own peculiar interpretations and practices from the tradition of legal formulations and procedures established by rabbis, the Essenes intensified the gap between themselves and the rest of their society.

Tefilin found at Qumran, for example, did not conform to rabbinic law. In some cases, the Ten Commandments were included. Contents of *tefillin* found at Qumran, although incomplete, are the

oldest yet discovered, and, quite surprisingly, some appear to contain both the orders according to Rashi and his grandson, Rabbenu Tam. This means the difference of opinion between them did not originate with them, but was at least more than a thousand years older.

The discovery of several sectarian Dead Sea Scrolls at Masada, may indicate that other scroll fragments found there, including some from the Tanach, were written by the Essenes. What are they doing there? Is it possible that Josephus was wrong and that the people who committed murder and suicide at Masada were not really Zealots, or Scarii, but Essenes? Did the Essenes join the defenders at Masada?

The function of the buildings excavated at Qumran is also controversial. Most scholars believe it was a sort of monastery in which scribes wrote and lived. Members of the sect may also have inhabited caves scattered throughout the surrounding mountains. With destruction by the Romans imminent, they may have hidden their works in caves adjacent to the central complex of buildings and from there, escaped into the desert, or even to Masada. Some believe they made their way to Babylon, where they eventually resurfaced hundreds of years later as Karaites, although this is quite doubtful. Other scholars have found similarities between the Essenes and the Samaritans.

The Essenes were part of an internal struggle within Jewish society at the end of the Second Temple Period. Their customs and beliefs, their apocalyptic vision and rejection of accepted leadership not only created a rift between them and the rest of Jewish society; they provided elements for the beginning of a new religion.

The Last Supper which Jesus shared with his disciples was probably a Passover meal prepared with unleavened bread and wine; the Dead Sea Scrolls describe a sacred meal of bread and wine that will be eaten at the end of days with the messiah. Were Jewish and Essene concepts and rituals incorporated into Christian ceremonies, like communion? The early Christian church was communistic; similarly, members of the Qumran community had to give up all private property. Both Christians and Essenes were eschatological communities – expecting the imminent end of the world. Although drawn from Jewish prophetic texts that spoke about the Day of Judgment, the Essenes gave it immediacy; Christianity gave it urgency.

In the Gospel of Luke, an angel appears to the Virgin Mary and announces: “And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the son of the Most High...the son of God.” (Luke 1:31-35) Nearly the same language appears in one of the scrolls: “He will be called great and he will be called Son of God, and they will call him Son of the Most High...He will judge the earth in righteousness...and every

nation will bow down to him..." (4Q 246)

Both communities tended to be dualistic – dividing the world into opposing forces of good and evil, light and darkness. There are references in the New Testament (especially in Paul and John) to this distinction. For example, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness" (John 8:12). And in the scrolls we read, "All the children of righteousness are ruled by the Prince of Light and walk in the ways of light, but all the children of falsehood are ruled by the Angel of Darkness and walk in the ways of darkness." (Rule of the Community, 3) Even the famous beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3-12) and in the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20-23) have striking parallels in the scrolls and apocryphal literature.

Although the Essenes used a solar calendar, similar to the Julian/Gregorian (Christian) calendar used today, its purpose is not clear. Moslems use a lunar calendar. Jews use one which is intercalated, basically lunar with solar additions.

One of the main differences between the two Jewish communities was in their concept of messiah. Except for several references in Psalms which refers to his being anointed (the literal meaning of *moshiach*), and in the Prophets, the Bible does not mention a messiah as savior; the term only begins to appear in the Second Temple period. Jewish texts refer to eschatological salvation and redemption, but do not emphasize it; the Essenes at Qumran (and later, Christianity) did, anticipating a specific messianic figure as part of their apocalyptic vision.

It is not clear if the Essenes believed in one messiah, or two. Some texts refer to the messiah as a priest, from the family of Aaron, and another from one of the other tribes of Israel. A scroll fragment called the "Messianic Apocalypse," however, speaks of a single messianic figure, and describes the resurrection of the dead. It is almost word for word parallel with the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. (In contrast, Jews believe that God, not the messiah, will resurrect the dead. There is, however, no reference in the Bible about a messiah raising the dead.)

Both Essene and Christian texts speak of a messianic personality in very human terms. But unlike the Christian belief that the messiah will bring salvation, or damnation, the Essenes avoided this definition, envisioning, rather, a final clash between the forces of good and evil. In that sense, perhaps, they saw themselves as social revolutionaries, who, by their example, would create a new world order.

In reaction to growing corruption and materialism during the late Second Temple period, driven

by apocalyptic beliefs that civilization as they saw it was about to collapse, the Essenes demanded purification – of themselves and the world. They insisted that they were “the chosen,” “the elect” who would ultimately prevail.

The unique contribution of the Essenes was their introduction of a new concept: a messiah as an eschatological figure, a savior, and themselves as his purified disciples. Depicted as the “Son of Man,” “Prince,” “Judge,” “Teacher of Righteousness,” he would bring about salvation, heal the sick, and raise the dead. His persecution and suffering was atonement for sins. Never before had any group dared to propose such a messianic identity and focus their lives in anticipation of his imminent arrival.

Was Christianity the spiritual heir of the Essenes? Was Christianity the vehicle by which Jewish messianism was spread throughout the world, albeit in a much different form? And what was the impact of these views on Jewish messianism as it developed subsequently, especially during times of persecution, as in the Middle Ages?

The Dead Sea Scrolls represent a turning point in Jewish history. They challenge us with intriguing questions about the nature and development of Judaism during a period of turmoil. Swept by waves of foreign cultures and armies, influenced by new ideas, Jewish civilization struggled to find stability and authenticity. With the destruction of the Temple and the development of Christianity, directions and distinctions became clearer. One path led towards normative Judaism, the other towards a very different world view.

In the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE) and the devastating Bar Kochba rebellion (135 CE), rabbis led the Jewish people towards the world of here-and-now, good deeds (*mitzvot*). The process of writing down the Oral Law, although primarily a scholarly activity, had tremendous implications for the next stage of Jewish history. It provided a structure and purpose to replace Temple rituals. And it occurred at the same time that a new religion was developing based on a messianic figure.

The Essenes at Qumran used the concept of messiah as an eschatological figure; this had never been done before (except perhaps in the Book of Daniel). But it was a necessary move to complement their extreme notions of purity and holiness. Although based on what may have been understood as Judaism at the time, at least for those who observed the strictest interpretation of the law, their notions of ritual cleanliness were infused with a sense of impending chaos and collapse. That’s why they needed to enclose themselves in a world of Fate and clung to an outside force, The Messiah, to bring salvation. They believed, perhaps, that in structuring their lives as part of a well-defined elite community, they would create a

model of perfection and be prepared for Redemption. Critical of Temple rituals and priestly authority, they shifted their focus from what became normative Judaism to apocalyptic theology.

Christianity did not abandon Jewish ethics and morality, but turned toward the primacy of Faith and The Messiah, rather than the life-structure embodied in the Oral Law.

The Essenes and later, Christianity, needed a messiah to rescue them from a world of evil – and they found one. It was a case of a self-fulfilling prophecy, and for Christianity *the* critical move. The Essenes had left the matter vague and were quickly extinguished. Pauline Christianity especially made it specific – Jesus – and thereby found the key to survival. Jesus, as The Messiah, was reborn forever; he had a name, a history and an identity. For some, however, his death, and the symbol for it, would represent, ironically, not his life and teaching, but anti-Jewish persecution.

Christianity's emphasis on messianism could not have evolved directly out of Judaism. It required a middleman, a transitional intellectual development that freed it theologically and nailed it down, literally, in corporeality, then moving it from the particular to the universal.

By opening up their new religion to anyone and everyone without conditions, or restrictions, Christianity offered the widest possible appeal. There were few obligations and few clear notions of sin, what was permitted, or prohibited, and even when these were violated, absolution was readily available.

This allowed for the most horrible contradictions in the history of civilization, the Holocaust, to be accomplished within Christian civilization. For many, belief was either disconnected from or trumped what one did. Atrocities were not considered evil, especially when it came to Jews. Until recently, toleration was only a temporary expedient; it was not an inherent part of faith. Islam adopted this terrible legacy and has yet to confront its theological-based hatred and persecution.

This is in sharp contrast to the Jewish life-system of *mitzvot*, a system sanctifying life – not salvation as a culminating catastrophic event. Judaism proposed a world that transcended tragedy while reaffirming a faith in God's love to explain suffering, to make meaningful existence a reality. Life expresses holiness, not the other way around. History is the unfolding of God's will within the context of Covenant, an eternal relationship which renders everything significant and purposeful, even tragedy.

The messianic idea persists in Judaism, but only as a reaffirmation of belief in God, not as an end in itself, or other-worldly phenomena. To give it prominence would be denying one's responsibility; to avoid it altogether might lead to the abandonment of hope.

Messianism is both inspiring and dangerous. It offers the possibility of the highest achievements that are humanly possible, and, as well, the total degradation of mankind. It can raise the human spirit, or bury it in sink-holes of blood. It can encourage a deeper appreciation of one's spirituality, and legitimize destruction and desecration – in the name of God.

Torah and the rabbis were very careful to avoid any form of a cult of personality. They understood that it could lead to a breakdown of the delicate system of checks and balances and ultimately, totalitarianism.

Rabbinic Judaism, the form of Judaism that survived and prevailed over the last two thousand years, made these distinctions very clear in spite of popular demands and hopes that one figure or another would save them. The rabbis understood that the end of one desperate situation could easily become the beginning of another.

The Essenes' concept of messianism, therefore, was not a Jewish response; Judaism emphasized a deeper awareness of Godliness as the essence of human relationships. It was not *belief* that marked Judaism's path, but engaging in the interaction between human effort and divine presence, a life of purpose and meaning, a commitment to Torah.

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